Literacy in a Changing World

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## Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements**  
5

**Foreword**  
7

**Part One**  
**Literacy in a Changing World**  
*Discussion Document*  
9

- Chapter 1  
  Introduction  
11

- Chapter 2  
  Influences on Literacy Achievement  
17

- Chapter 3  
  Challenges in Literacy  
27

- Chapter 4  
  Digital Literacy  
37

- Chapter 5  
  Literacy and Disadvantage  
45

- Chapter 6  
  Literacy and Special Educational Needs  
55

- Chapter 7  
  Results of the INTO Questionnaire on Literacy 2011-11-07  
65

- Chapter 8  
  Literacy in the Northern Ireland Context  
73

**Bibliography**  
81

**Appendices**

I. Description of a project on parental involvement  
89

II. Home-School Reading Project  
98

III. Successful Literacy Power Hour in an Urban DEIS School  
111

IV. Write to Read Project  
119

V. Family Literacy (NALA)  
126

**Part Two**  
**Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education**  
131

- Chapter 9  
  Speeches and Presentations  
132

- Chapter 10  
  Discussion Groups and Workshops  
166
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Literacy is a fundamental skill without which, full participation in many aspects of life becomes a struggle. Ireland has traditionally valued literacy and despite having some of the largest class sizes in the OECD, the standard of literacy in our primary schools has not fallen in recent years.

Our understanding of literacy no longer just encompasses the skills of reading and writing, but broader skills such as the ability to understand other forms of communication including electronic, broadcast and digital media. In our primary schools, literacy refers to these skills in both English and Irish.

The choice of topic for this year's Consultative Conference on Education was a timely one, coinciding as it does with the publication of the DES's National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People. The INTO was very active in the discussions leading up to the development of the Strategy and can take credit for some of the differences between the draft plan and the final version.

However, it must be pointed out that a strategy that demands more time, more assessment and more reporting will not make a significant difference until teachers are empowered to implement the curriculum as intended. Class size is the key to literacy and numeracy. Our modern curriculum was never meant for overcrowded classes. It simply cannot be implemented as intended in overcrowded classrooms.

I wish to extend the Organisation's thanks to our guest presenters and workshop presenters. In particular, it was an honour to have poet Seamus Heaney at the Consultative Conference on Education to receive a small token of the esteem in which he has always been held by Irish primary teachers. His contribution to literacy, both as a teacher educator and as a poet has been immense.

Thanks are also due to the Education Committee who prepared this discussion document and acted as facilitators and rapporteurs at the Consultative Conference, and to the Education team in Head Office, led by Deirbhile Nic Craith, Senior Official.

Sheila Nunan
General Secretary
May 2014
Part I

Literacy in a Changing World

Discussion Document
Introduction

Definition of literacy

Literacy is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as the ability to read and write. However, in recent decades, as a result of developments in technologies and a shift of demands in education, literacy has taken on a wider meaning.

According to Rassool (1999) ‘literacy cannot be regarded as an autonomous set of skills’, but as ‘a social practice that is integrally linked with ideology, culture, knowledge and power’. Rassool uses the terms ‘organic’ and ‘multidimensional’ to explain how literacy is a cultural activity that impacts on people’s everyday lives and how it serves a number of purposes in society. These purposes include the social, economic, ideological and political. Flewitt (2008) expands on the above theory by explaining how children’s different modes of learning are influenced by the social and cultural environments in which they find themselves. Children ‘use combinations of different modes such as gesture, gaze, movement, image, layout, movement and sound effects’ to become literate. Flewitt (2008) also refers to the various forms of technologies, such as mobile phones, computers and game consoles that children have to become literate in. Not only do young children have to learn to interpret the traditional word and picture, but they also have to deal with screen based and digital texts.

Interestingly, literacy is defined by the authors of the government-sponsored initiative Delivering Equal Opportunities in Schools (DEIS, 2005c) as ‘the integration of reading, writing, listening and speaking’. However, according to the National Economic Social Forum (NESF) (2009) in its report Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues the skills required for literacy ‘point to a more holistic focus on comprehension, analysis and critical evaluation’ and it suggests that the definition of literacy should be widened from simply reading and writing to encompassing skills such as oral language, comprehension analytical skills and use of IT.

In her paper for the Reading Association Ireland Conference 2009, entitled A Transformative Literacy for the 21st Century, Mulcahy speaks about different types of literacy and defines them under the following headings: functional, cultural, progressive and critical. Functional literacy is the traditional view of literacy, where those who are functionally literate have mastered the skills necessary for daily living. Cultural literacy, according to Hirsh (1988) presupposes the existence of a body of common knowledge, which Mulcahy (2009) believes may militate against many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. On the other hand progressive literacy is defined as a literacy which is student-centred and holistic and is often implemented through the use of readers’ and writers’ workshops. Students engaged in progressive literacy have more control over their learning. Critical literacy, according to Mulcahy (2009)
...delves deeply into socio-political and sociocultural issues to identify the root cause of social inequalities and injustices ... educators concern themselves with encouraging people to think more reflectively about the world and to identify ways to act upon the world and enact change against relations of oppression. In this way it is a literacy of transformation.

(Mulcahy, 2009, p.163).

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2011) in its recent publication *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People* defines literacy in the following way:

Traditionally we have thought about literacy as the skills of reading and writing; but today our understanding of literacy encompasses much more than that. Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media

(DES, 2011, p.8).

Children in Ireland learn two languages from the early years of the primary school – Irish and English. Children are therefore engaged in literacy development in two languages, though to a different extent depending on the linguistic context of the school. Literacy in one language can support literacy in another, a fact which is also understood in the context of learning English as an additional language or in learning modern languages.

One of the key considerations of the 1999 revised curriculum is a commitment to the provision of a high quality education, with particular emphasis on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. These skills are considered

...central to effective learning in every area of the curriculum and to the child’s social and community life outside school .... (to) educational success in post –primary school ..... and (to) enabling every individual to realise his or her social and vocational potential.

(Primary School Curriculum, Introduction, p.26).

Any consideration of literacy today must also consider the nature of digital literacy.

**Literacy and the curriculum**

The acquisition of literacy is a principal concern of the English curriculum and this reflects stated national policy. It is important that reading, comprehension and writing skills are acquired systematically and that children with particular learning needs are identified at an early stage and provided with adequate remedial support.

(Government of Ireland, 1999, p..2).

The above extract from the Primary School English Curriculum (1999) embodies its main aim. Literacy and numeracy feature prominently within the Primary School Curriculum Introduction and indeed English was the first area of the 1999 Curriculum to be implemented and the first, along with visual arts and maths, to be reviewed in 2003/2004. Following this review the structure of the English Curriculum was amended to make it more accessible, the original four strands were reassigned as strand units. The additional support material issued to teachers sets out the following:
Strands:
- Oral Language
- Reading
- Writing

Strand Units:
- Receptiveness to language
- Competence and confidence in using language
- Developing cognitive abilities through language
- Emotional and imaginative development through language

Reviews of the English Curriculum, (2003/2004) carried out by both the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Department of Education and Science (DES), brought to light some other interesting facts regarding the implementation of the English curriculum. On the positive side, there was good evidence of environment-based learning, and newspapers, magazines and the use of the novel in the classroom were considered widespread and successful. However, the studies noted that in classrooms where there was high usage of textbooks children did not engage as willingly in their own learning. More than half the teachers reported using pair and group work in their teaching, a method found to be popular with the children. The greatest challenge to the classroom teacher in the teaching of English was catering for different needs of the pupils, but the findings show that despite that challenge the vast majority of teachers used differentiation in their teaching. Opportunities for children to develop their skills in higher-order thinking and problem-solving were limited according to both studies (DES, 2005; NCCA, 2005, p.4). Oral language tended to be taught incidentally rather than using discrete time in a large number of classrooms. In general, reading was considered effective with a good emphasis on emergent reading. Challenges identified included a lack of variety of texts, mechanical reading, insufficient emphasis on the writing process and an underutilisation of IT.

**Irish**

The curriculum for Irish contains four strands – listening, speaking, reading and writing. A key objective of the Irish curriculum is that children will enjoy the language as well as understand and use it. The Irish curriculum has been criticised, however, for not being sufficiently rich as a mother-tongue curriculum for native Irish speakers, particularly in comparison with the English curriculum. The NCCA is currently in the process of revising the Language curriculum taking on board the findings of curriculum reviews to date and the recommendations of the recently published national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy, referred to below.

**Mathematical literacy**

The discipline of mathematics has been with us for many generations, but the expectation that ordinary citizens be quantitatively literate has arisen in relatively recent times. Literacy and numeracy have remained bracketed together in the public mind, and numeracy issues are often subsumed under literacy. Literacy still influences all major discussions on numeracy, and numeracy has been seen as 'an analogue of literacy'. Competence in Mathematical Literacy is also, of necessity, irrevocably bound up with competence in language:
Mathematics may be seen as the science of magnitude, number, shape, space and their relationships and also as a universal language based on symbols and diagrams. It involves the handling (arrangement, analysis, manipulation and communication) of information, the making of predictions and solving of problems through the use of language that is both concise and accurate.

Primary School Curriculum 1999 – Mathematics

Tracing the understanding of quantitative literacy / numeracy / mathematical literacy is a complex and evolving field. Though considered important, understandings of quantitative literacy or mathematical literacy are somewhat contested. There is also considerable debate on the level of skills and competences needed. Some argue that having a basic knowledge of number sense and algebra is enough to be mathematically literate; while others assert that it is necessary to have minimum skills in arithmetic, measurement, algebra, geometry, probability, statistics and logic to qualify as a mathematically literate person. In essence, mathematical literacy is emerging as the ability to understand and apply basic mathematics in our everyday lives.

The Revised Curriculum outlined the pivotal role that mathematical literacy has in equipping a learner for life:

Mathematics education is concerned with the acquisition, understanding and application of skills. Mathematical literacy is of central importance in providing the child with the necessary skills to live a full life as a child and later as an adult. Society needs people who can think and communicate quantitatively and who can recognise situations where mathematics can be applied to solve problems. It is necessary to make sense of data encountered in the media, to be competent in terms of vocational mathematical literacy and to use appropriate technology to support such applications. This curriculum will be a key factor in preparing children to meet the demands of the 21st century.

Primary School Curriculum 1999.

The importance of mathematical literacy in everyday situations was also emphasised by the NCCA (Helping your young child with Maths) and the OECD ('Quantitative Literacy: Why Numeracy Matters for Schools and Colleges'). The recently published National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People has as its aim that every child should leave school having mastered literacy and numeracy and sets out measures to improve numeracy. These measures include increasing the amount of time spent teaching mathematics and the setting of targets for national achievement in international assessments like OECD’s PISA.

Teacher education

One of the Teaching Council’s functions is to ‘advise the Minister in relation to...the professional development of teachers’, (Sections 7(2)(h) and 39 of the Teaching Council Act, 2001). In its role to promote this development, the Council has recently published a policy document on the continuum of teacher education with a focus on the need for ‘new models of provision ... to assist teachers to develop and broaden their professional knowledge, skills and competences’. Literacy and numeracy feature strongly in the Teaching Council’s policy document on the continuum of teacher education. Teacher education, including induction and CPD also feature strongly in the recently published strategy on improving literacy and numeracy (considered below).

The NESF highlighted the centrality of teacher professional development in enhancing literacy. They stated that opportunities to share practice and to discuss evaluations of
literacy outcomes can be provided through professional development. However, it is important to take a broad definition of professional development, which includes understanding literacy and its complexities in addition to focusing on skills and strategies (NESF, 2009). Mullan’s (2007) research into the Government’s provision of resources and initiatives examined the relationship between improvement in literacy levels and in-career development for teachers. Her study of one school’s use of a specific reading programme showed that commitment by the principal to professional development and the high quality teaching that occurred as result of all staff members attending literacy skill training was instrumental in improving literacy skills throughout the school (Mullan, 2007, p. 199).

The Teaching Council intends to work towards a position where renewal of registration with the Teaching Council (p. 19) will be subject to the receipt of satisfactory evidence in relation to engagement in CPD. Hopefully this will only occur following the adoption of a coherent national framework for CPD. The number of summer courses available to teachers in the areas of literacy and numeracy increased in the summer of 2011.

Initial teacher education and induction are equally important in supporting teachers. The National Induction Programme (NIPT) for newly qualified teachers includes modules on literacy, numeracy and assessment. As Burke stated, ‘traditionally in Ireland, .... introduction to the classroom often consisted of being handed the keys and the roll book and given the advice ‘If you need anything, I’m down the corridor or ask the teacher next door’ (Burke, 2010, p. 9). According to Burke, the provision of ‘a high quality induction programme’ with ‘real, meaningful and ongoing learning opportunities’ and ‘access to a trained mentor’ for NQTs are considered to be pre-requisites for the ‘enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning for the pupils in the school’ (Burke, 2010, p. 127).

**Concluding comment**

Chapter two of this report considers some of the factors that influence achievement in literacy, looking in particular at parental involvement; early years’ education; school culture and climate; gender and language. Challenges associated with literacy achievement in Ireland are discussed in chapter three with a focus on the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools and on the role of assessment. Chapter four looks at the emergence of new literacies with an emphasis on digital literacy and the attendant challenges posed for schools and teachers. In chapter five, the topic of literacy and disadvantage is looked at and the various intervention programmes implemented in disadvantaged schools in order to support improvements in literacy and numeracy are also considered. The topic of Special Education and associated literacy challenges is discussed in chapter six. In chapter seven, the results of an INTO questionnaire on literacy, which was conducted in 2011, are outlined. Finally, chapter eight gives an overview of literacy in Northern Ireland with descriptions of the strategies and initiatives recently introduced in that context.
Influences on Literacy Achievement

There are a number of factors that influence literacy achievement, which have been well researched and documented. Some of these factors are internal to the school, such as school culture, quality of teaching and learning, school leadership and the learning environment. Other factors are external to the school, and include home and community factors. A brief consideration is given here to some of these factors.

Parental involvement

Schools are acutely aware of the importance of creating an atmosphere where books and reading are seen as both valuable and pleasurable experiences. They aim to provide a wide range of reading materials that reflect different genres and explore different interests as early as possible in the child’s school career.

However the acquisition of literacy does not begin in school. One of the primary influences on literacy levels is the home environment in which the children live and where their attitudes towards reading are initially fostered. Parents themselves need to create a positive attitude towards reading through providing a ‘book-rich’ environment, allowing children to experience the pleasure and success of sharing stories with them thus developing the skills of listening and telling. Children need to see their parents reading. Parents who read and share stories with their children, model ‘how to read’ and demonstrate that reading is fun (Wang, 2000). Discussion around stories helps children to ‘understand’ the reading material.

These are laudable aspirations in a society where children come from ‘similar’ social, cultural and economic backgrounds. However, socio-economic status, health and welfare influence the access children have to education as they move through the education system. Yet most children are born with basic capabilities in homes of love, care and fun. Their parents, who may not have had many educational opportunities, are no less interested in their children’s education:

While it is correct that children, who are failed by the current system, often come from backgrounds of poverty, yet an exclusive focus on the negative differences that influence their lives can fail to acknowledge their potential and their resilience.

(Gilligan, 2007, p. 45)

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Years Care and Education, reflects this positive emphasis on diversity. It is applicable to all children from birth to six years and focuses on children’s learning and development in the early years. It values and supports all adults especially parents who work with children in their early years. The Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) has a Parent Mentoring programme where parent mentors support and encourage positive parenting approaches between parents and children.
The recently published strategy to improve literacy and numeracy acknowledges ‘the significant positive impact on a child’s educational achievement’ made by the active involvement of parents.

The period from birth to three years is of crucial importance in the child’s physical, social, cognitive and linguistic development. .... Partnership with parents and families plays a central role in nurturing this development and in laying the foundations for further learning in school.

(DES, 2011, p. 19)

A supportive home ethos for literacy may presuppose that parents themselves have achieved a certain level of literacy. Research suggests that parental involvement in a child’s learning has more of an impact on the child’s educational outcomes than any other demographic measure, including social class, level of parental education or income (Feinstein and Symons, 1999). So while parental background may explain parental interest it is not the most defining factor. There is a myriad of literature that analyses the lives of the educationally disadvantaged and describes the range of contributing factors including the educational attainments of parents. Gilligan criticises the use of this negative reflection in accounting for ‘failure of those who experience educational disadvantage’ (2007, p. 43). She proposes that models of parent empowerment, such as those developed and funded by the Children’s Aid Society in New York should be examined by the DES: a ‘parent involvement model that gives real power to the parents and encourages parent advocacy efforts (where) parents are professionally trained and paid as Home School Community Liaison officers’ (Gilligan, 2007, p. 43).

In 2009, NALA proposed a refreshed adult literacy and numeracy strategy to advance national policy to tackle the intolerably low levels in Irish society. NALA suggested that improving family literacy would improve the performance of children in school.

It is vital that a refreshed strategy is developed as a matter of urgency. It should straddle education and training and take account of the broader contexts of adult literacy and numeracy development. It is important that the mechanisms for its development, implementation and review are clear .... such a response will raise literacy and numeracy levels, as well as impact on ..... children’s school performance.

(NALA, 2009)

Some current area-based anti-poverty programmes managed by Barnardos, the VEC, the ISPCC and NALA provide immense support and advice to parents in a holistic approach to tackling literacy. Schemes such as Write Minded Ballymun are also valuable for developing links between home, school and community. The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme provides a positive empowering experience for many families to deal with school and community. There is a need to coordinate the various schemes with a view to improving services and making ‘a real measurable and positive difference to the lives and learning successes of children’ (DES, 2011, p. 21).

**Early Years’ Education**

John Carr, in his introduction to *Leading Early Years* (Proceedings of the INTO Consultative Conference on Education, 2005) declared that early childhood education was an ‘integral part of every child’s universal right to education’. This entitlement could not be put ‘on hold’ until the child started school at age four or five but needed to become the foundation of the educational system. John Coolahan, in his address to the
same conference, stressed the importance of integrating the care and educational needs of preschool children:

The economic drive at the moment is really very much focused on care, but it is crucial that care and education be integrated in our planning.

(Coolahan, 2005)

The National Childcare Strategy 2006-2010 outlined a programme to provide quality early childhood care and education for children and their parents at local level. The National Childcare Strategy identified appropriate training programmes for the workforce that would meet with international standards. Investment of over €500 million was allocated to both the private and community sector to develop childcare facilities.

Síolta, the National Quality Framework, was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) to support quality in the provision of early years’ education and childcare facilities. Síolta is complemented by Aistear, the early years’ curriculum framework for children from birth to six, which was developed by the NCCA. The need to establish strong home/school links and the need for effective home/pre-school settings has been recognized in Aistear (NCCA, 2009):

Parents are the most important people in children’s lives. The care and education that children receive from their parents and family, especially during their early months and years, greatly influence their overall development. Extended family and community also have important roles to play

(Aistear: Principles and Themes, NCCA, 2009, p.9)

Since the closure of the CECDE, responsibility for the development of early childhood education lies with the Early Years Policy Unit within the Department of Education and Skills, which is now collocated with the Childcare Directorate in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. An entitlement to a free pre-school year prior to starting school was introduced for all three year old children in January 2010. It is estimated that about 95% of the relevant age cohort are availing of the services of the scheme. Preschool services participating in the scheme must agree to implement Síolta and Aistear. The qualification levels required of the staff have been set too low at level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications with a view to raising it to Level 6. The INTO is of the view that the service should be graduate led. Higher capitation grants are available to services that employ graduates with qualifications at levels 7 or higher. A workforce development plan has also been put in place. The establishment of the free pre-school year is recognition of the importance of the early years in laying the foundations of learning. Early Start, an early years educational intervention programme established in 1994 in primary schools catering for three-year-old children has not been further expanded but continues to provide a high quality early intervention programme to three year old children in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

The NCCA has prioritized the revision of the primary school curriculum for the infant classes in order to reflect the philosophy and approaches in Aistear. Priority is being given to the language curriculum initially. However, class size remains a challenge in many infant classes, where teachers struggle to provide an activity and play-based curriculum, where the foundations for early literacy and early mathematics are laid. In the context of the broad recognition of the importance of the early years, and the increased investment in supporting the early years, attention at policy level has yet to be given to the infant classes in primary schools.
School Culture and Climate

The Primary School Curriculum 1971 acknowledged that ‘traditional methods of teaching children unduly emphasised mastery of the mechanics of reading and writing’ and set out the importance of providing opportunities for children ‘to listen and imitate, .... to have access to books and pictures ... and to engage in play and make-believe’ (Primary School Curriculum, 1971, Part 1, p. 83). Thirty years later the Revised Primary School Curriculum 1999 endorses these same principles and stresses the importance of developing a ‘reading culture’ in the school (NCCA, English, Teacher Guidelines, 1999, p. 19).

While the value of the ‘structured reading scheme’, mastering basic sight vocabulary and acquiring knowledge of phonics are seen as valuable skills that contribute to reading prowess, they are only part of the process of learning to read: the development of oral language and the provision of purposeful language activities are the cornerstones.

There is concern that the wide curriculum can result in ‘curriculum over-load’ and that class time may not be used most effectively for the development of language and literacy. The NCCA has been examining the presentation of the curriculum and adapting it to clarify learning outcomes. These revisions to the curriculum will also help with planning and assessment. The curriculum planning tool has also been of great assistance to teachers in their planning.

There is growing concern among teachers at disengagement with reading and the increasing preference for other leisure activities over reading.

In today’s society, the view that reading should be promoted and assessed purely as a cognitive skill is being re-evaluated in light of evidence that affective factors, such as reading motivation, may feature as significant in the battle to promote literacy. The idea that the child who is not motivated to read is, at best, equally disadvantaged to the one who is struggling in the area of literacy merits consideration and this is well captured in Mark Twain’s famous quote that ‘The man who doesn’t read great books has no advantage over the man who can’t read them’.

(Kelly Doolan, NUIG, 2008)

A well-stocked library, both in the classroom and in the school and access to a local library provide a valuable resource. Research found that there was a positive, statistically significant link between reading achievement and the number of books in a class library (Eivers et al., 2004; 2005; DES, 2011, p. 21). Visits from writers, poets and story-tellers also raise the profile of reading.

A whole school approach to the early identification of children with language and reading difficulties is essential followed by the provision of appropriate programmes of remediation. Assessment should involve a wide range of assessment tools and focus on learning activities in each strand: receptiveness to language, competence and confidence in using the language, developing cognitive abilities through language and emotional and imaginative development through language.

There is little research about the relationship ‘between achievement and what happens in a class or school’ in Ireland (Eivers et al, 2009, p. 11). The 2009 National Assessments of English reading and mathematics drew heavily on international research for indicators of the connection between ‘within school’ practice and reading achievement.
Reading was successful when it was emphasised as a pleasurable activity and when the teacher embedded the teaching ‘into a wider context, engaged in coaching pupils on reading strategies, asked higher level oral comprehension questions following reading and had high expectations of their pupils’ (Eivers et al, 2009, p. 11). Therefore, whole school policy and the approaches of individual teachers impact significantly on pupil achievement and engagement in literacy in schools.

The Education Act 1998 outlines the responsibilities of the principal to provide leadership, guidance and direction to teachers and pupils and together with the Board of Management to cultivate and foster an environment which is supportive of learning for the students and which promotes the professional development of the teachers. The role of instructional leader requires the principal to create a positive and open atmosphere, where standards of teaching and learning are discussed and good practice is shared. Principals will model the ‘kinds of behaviour and attitudes (they) want the schools to have’ (Smith, 2002, p.18) and invite staff to be actively involved in innovation and change. The central role of school principals has also been identified by Mackey et al (2006), who argued that in addition to becoming knowledgeable instructional leaders, school principals should exhibit the characteristics of strong leadership by cultivating a community of learners, giving voice to all stakeholders and envisioning key values. According to Mullan, who examined the implementation of a literacy programme in one particular school, the commitment of the principal teacher to professional development and the high quality teaching that occurred as a result of all staff members attending literacy skill training was instrumental in improving literacy skills throughout the school (Mullan, 2007, p. 99).

**Gender**

There has been a significant history of research into the achievements of both boys and girls in school. Gender differences in achievement are usually monitored in national and international assessments. The underachievement of boys and their performance in school has gained attention in more recent years and resources have been allocated in their favour (Raider-Roth and Albert, 2008). The Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report (DES, 1993) found that the ratio of boys to girls receiving Learning Support at that time was 3:2 and that the ratio of boys to girls with Specific Learning Disability was 7:3. Ten years later in 2003, a DES census showed that 65% of the children receiving support for high incidence special educational needs were boys (roughly the same 3:2 ratio indicated in SERC). These findings were reflected in the allocation of teaching resources for pupils who need additional support in mainstream primary school classes.

The 2009 National Assessments indicated that there were significant gender differences, in favour of girls, on the overall scale and on all subscales among the children tested at second class level in English reading (NA, 2009, p. 27). In her keynote address to the Annual Conference of the Reading Association of Ireland in 2005 Eve Bearne considered the issue of the continuing (and sometimes growing) gap between boys’ and girls’ achievements in literacy. She found that a shift in teaching methodologies e.g. buddy reading, group reading with an emphasis on enjoyment of reading, teacher modelling responses to reading rather than concentrating on decoding skills helped boys to make more progress in literacy. Perhaps the new focus on methodologies and differentiation in the Primary School Curriculum (1999) might account for the gender difference in the National Assessment scores in sixth class pupils being less marked.

As school communities in Ireland become more pluralist there will be a need to examine the views of other cultures towards the education of girls and look at international
statistics on female literacy. In developing countries fewer girls than boys tend to go to school. Yet, as homemakers, girls are most likely to affect the health, welfare and education of their families. According to a study carried out by Atkins and Rose in England, Malta and Ireland, involving policy makers, practitioners, adult learners, ex-learners, non-participating fathers and children’s teachers on family literacy programmes, the female dominance was particularly noticeable in Ireland where ‘at the time of the study, no men were found to be involved in the delivery, policymaking process or participation of family literacy programmes’ (Atkins and Rose, 2007, p. 267). Gender continues to play a significant role in literacy achievement.

Language

The linguistic context of schools in Ireland varies. Pupils in all schools are expected to achieve competency in literacy in two languages – Irish and English – to varying degrees. The majority of schools teach through the medium of English and Irish is taught to pupils as a second language. A small percentage of pupils may be exempt from learning Irish due to learning difficulties, or where they have entered the Irish education system after their eleventh birthday. The last decade has also seen an increase in the number of pupils in Irish schools who have come from other countries. Many of these pupils do not speak English or Irish as home languages. Teaching English as a second language is therefore a new aspect of English teaching in our schools, giving rise to new challenges for teachers and policy-makers.

The Irish-medium Sector

A small minority of schools, less than 10%, teach through the medium of Irish. However, within the Irish medium sector, there are schools located in Irish-speaking communities, the Gaeltacht, where Irish is the dominant community language and therefore the mother-tongue of a significant percentage of the pupils. There are also schools in the Gaeltacht where Irish is the medium of instruction in the schools but may not be the dominant mother tongue among pupils. Outside Gaeltacht areas, Irish-medium schools operate an immersion approach, where pupils, the vast majority of whom do not speak Irish as a home language, are immersed in the Irish language on arrival in school. Much discussion has taken place in recent years concerning the teaching of emergent literacy in such contexts, as there are a variety of practices. Some schools commence with Irish literacy while others commence with English. Some schools operate a full early immersion programme, teaching no formal English until the second term in senior infants, while others teach formal English from the first or second term in junior infants. There is no evidence to suggest that either approach is more effective. Schools decide on an approach that best meets the needs of their own context.

The National Assessments in Irish-medium schools in English reading and mathematics took place in May 2010. The same tests which were administered to a random sample of all primary schools in May 2009 were used. The report of the National Assessments in Irish-medium schools was published in 2011.

Research carried out by Parsons and Lyddy (2010), which examined the development of reading skills in English and Irish in a Gaeltacht school, an Irish-medium school and an English-medium school, found that the differences between pupils in the participating schools in English reading had reduced by the time the pupils were in fourth class. This small-scale research set out to investigate the effects of bilingual teaching practices on reading attainments in Irish and English and to identify skills and predictors of reading in Irish and English. Some of their findings are as follows:
• Pupils in the Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools acquired better levels of Irish decoding skills, Irish vocabulary and knowledge of Irish orthographic patterns than children attending English-medium schools;
• Pupils of the Irish-medium and Gaeltacht schools acquired these skills without disadvantaging their later reading and decoding skills in English;
• Pupils in Gaeltacht schools showed earlier development in oral Irish related areas.
• For all groups of pupils, scores in vocabulary-related English tasks were higher than those in Irish;
• Even for those schooled teaching through Irish, scores in English reading and comprehension tasks were higher than the results in Irish, reflecting the societal dominance of the English language.

Given that Parsons and Lyddy’s research was small-scale, further research on the outcomes for pupils in Irish-medium settings warrants further consideration.

**English as an Additional Language (EAL)**

Within the past ten years Ireland has become a more diverse and multicultural society. Figures from the census conducted by the CSO in 2006 show that there was a total of 420,000 non-Irish nationals living in Ireland in April 2006. Non-Irish nationals represented approximately 10% of the population in 2006, an increase on the 5.8% in the 2002 census.

The children of non-Irish nationals are entitled to enrol in both primary and secondary schools regardless of legal status. Additional data collected by schools in 2007 based on the principals’ best estimates of pupils by nationality showed that of the 459,443 enrolled in primary schools 415,514 were classified as Irish, 23,226 were from a state within the E.U., and 20,703 were non-EU nationals. Overall 9.6% of primary school pupils in 2007 were classified as non-Irish. Many of these non-Irish children come from homes where neither English nor Irish, the medium of language of our schools, are their first language. The linguistic landscape in Irish primary schools has evolved in a short space of time into a complex web in which the teaching/learning process is inextricably bound up. The Language Education Policy Profile report found ‘languages that are widely spoken as mother tongues among Irish immigrant communities include: Vietnamese, Polish, Moldovan, Chinese, Lithuanian, Romanian, Arabic, Albanian, Yoruba and Russian (DES, 2005, 2007). There are speakers of at least 60 different languages registered in Irish schools’ (DES, 2005, p.28). With such a diverse range of linguistic backgrounds there are many pupils who require additional support in the English language so that they can engage with the curriculum. According to the NCCA ‘the child for whom English is an additional language should have access to appropriate support structures and resources which will enable him/her to engage to his/her fullest potential with the curriculum’ (www.ncca.ie).

**Provision of Resources**

Pupils who enrol in schools and are perceived to require English as an additional language support are assessed using the pupils’ proficiency in English language assessment kit. Based on the level of support required applications are made to the DES on a yearly basis for the sanctioning of resources. Resources are mainly in the form of a language support teaching post (EAL teacher). Pupils who require this support are entitled to a maximum of two years language support. The nature and provision of the support to these learners have changed in recent times. In 2010, with budgetary changes
the DES has capped the number of language support teachers at two per school. Schools with a high proportion of pupils who require English language support i.e. 25% or more may apply to the DES for the provision of extra resources.

The EAL teacher devises appropriate language programmes, teaches the programmes and records and monitors pupils’ progress. EAL teachers also share their expertise with class teachers and assist in developing and disseminating good practice to support the development of students’ English language proficiency. As the EAL teacher and the classroom teacher are working together, it is important that programme content, methodologies and approaches, as well as homework, are planned together and regularly reviewed. Targets set should be clearly understood and consistency established. The English Language Proficiency Levels specify what pupils should be able to achieve in English at each level and thus reflect the task-based approach to teaching and learning. Tasks have been selected to reflect what pupils encounter daily in the classroom. Scoring procedures have been designed to achieve accurate results, provided the tests are administered strictly according to the instructions provided.

**Second Language Acquisition**

The Silent Phase is the starting point for most learners acquiring a new language. It is a phase in which the child may speak very little, if at all. The duration of this phase varies, lasting from a few months up to a year, and is viewed as a normal stage in second-language acquisition. During this time the child may use other strategies for communicating, for example, signals or other body language. The former Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT) developed observational prompts and checklists to help teachers to monitor the child’s interaction with others during this phase of language development. The teacher can assist the child’s involvement in classroom activities by using simple and routine phrases in English to accompany his/her actions. The child’s initial involvement may also be prompted when interacting with others in the class. Additionally, peer-tutoring (i.e. student/student teaching) should increase the child’s participation in classroom learning activities.

Second-language acquisition mirrors the developmental stages in learning a first language and so it is essential that children are provided with opportunities to constantly interact using this target language (Intouch, 2009). The skills of listening and speaking are developed first, before moving to reading and writing. Listening and speaking skills are fostered using visual stimuli and involve a large degree of scaffolding and the approach known as Total Physical Response (TPR). The receptive skill of listening will develop before the child speaks in the additional language. Teachers need to be aware that the child in their classroom receiving additional support in learning English is coming from a complex linguistic background, where he/she sees and hears adults using varieties of languages in different ways. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) provides some useful guidance, as does the NCCA.

**EAL and Literacy**

As with the acquisition of any additional language, the skills of listening and speaking have been shown to develop faster than literacy skills. Even though pupils may be literate in their first language, ‘they will need opportunities to manipulate and play with the sounds of the English language thus enabling them to master the sounds of a different phonetic system’ (Intouch, December, 2009). In order to develop an EAL

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1 Materials currently hosted at www.ncca.ie

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*Literacy in a Changing World*
pupil’s literacy skills schools and classrooms should be print rich and visually stimulating. The school/class library should contain dual language books and dictionaries, with a wide variety of books, including high interest / low ability books.

While EAL pupils can become fluent in speaking another language in addition to their mother tongue in a relatively short space of time, becoming truly literate in the English language to the extent of full and free engagement with the education process can take longer. Many studies indicate that at least five years is typically required for second-language students to catch up in English academic skills such as vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (e.g., Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1981; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Klesmer, 1994; cited in Cummins, 2009). Hence the provision of support which is set at a maximum of two years is less than adequate. Some EAL students may avail of Learning Support when their real need is additional language support. Pupils who are literate in their first language can often experience difficulties in reading and writing in the second language which can lead to a negative influence on their overall functional literacy levels. On the other hand, literacy in one language can support literacy development in a second language, according to the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI). Bilingual children engage in a variety of literacy practices in their own homes, which can be drawn upon in the classroom.

Any language policy in Ireland needs to take account of Ireland’s current linguistic diversity. Newcomer children should be offered mother-tongue support in addition to opportunities to acquire English as an additional language. The issue of EAL in the literacy landscape of Irish primary schools needs to continue to be kept to the fore of any discussion on literacy.

Concluding Comments

This chapter has briefly outlined some of the factors that influence literacy development. The centrality of parental involvement and engagement in their children’s literacy development was highlighted. The early years are crucial for laying the foundations for literacy development, both at home and in early educational settings. Once children start school, the school’s culture and climate play a key role in supporting children’s literacy development. Boys, in particular, need support, because girls continue to do better at literacy than boys. Children with special educational needs, and children whose home language is neither English nor Irish also need additional focussed support to develop their literacy skills. Primary schools in Ireland reflect the increasing diversity of Irish society - a diversity which creates additional challenges for teachers in supporting the literacy development of all pupils.
Challenges in Literacy

Within a year of the tenth anniversary of the introduction of the revised curriculum, concern was being expressed that ‘one in ten children leaves primary school with severe literacy difficulties ... (the) figure rising to one in three in disadvantaged communities’ (Children’s Rights Alliance News, 2009). In 2000, Ireland was ranked fifth out of twenty-nine OECD countries for reading literacy for 15-year-olds, however, the 2009 PISA study reported that Ireland’s mean score on reading literacy had declined by 31 points between 2000 and 2009, the largest (decline) across all countries that participated in both PISA 2000 and PISA 2009. Ireland’s overall rank dropped from 5th to 17th among those countries with student performance declining uniformly across all ability levels. Concerns about Literacy were also raised in the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (2009) which identified issues around children’s proficiency in subject areas, the professional development of teachers, learning targets and assessment.

National Assessments 2009

The 2009 National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading took place in May 2009 involving children at second class and sixth class (Eivers, Close, Shiel, Millar, Gilleece, and Kiniry, 2010). As these assessments took place at different class levels to the previous national assessments it is not possible to compare outcomes. However, a summary of results were given as follows: the overall mean per cent correct for reading at second class was 63%, vocabulary and comprehension scores both at 63%. At sixth class the overall percentage was 65%, vocabulary being 64% and comprehension being 66%. At second class girls outperformed boys in all areas of reading, but at sixth class there was no gender difference.

The report lists factors related to achievement in the assessments and makes some recommendations to improve achievements. Factors related to achievement reflect some factors already identified in earlier studies. Pupils with higher test scores generally had high attendance at school, were rated positively by themselves, their parents and their teachers at reading. They also enjoyed reading and were not in need of additional learning support at school. Parental confidence in their ability to help with children’s homework, the absence of a television in their bedroom and low rates of time spent on the internet or computer games were also related to high levels of achievement. On the other hand, pupils with lower scores were more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic background, or a home where there was unemployment. Children from the Traveller community fared less well as did children from homes where English was not the first language. Lack of books, resources and low-levels of parental reading were other factors associated with pupils’ low achievement. Some teacher and school characteristics were shown to be linked with pupil achievement. Teachers in possession of a higher qualification (e.g. M.Ed.) and those with more experience had a positive effect on achievement. Infrequent use of workbooks was associated with higher reading.

2 PISA 2012 results show Ireland’s performance in literacy as being similar to 2000, 2003 and 2006, indicating that Ireland’s performance is constant.
scores at Sixth Class. Higher attendance rates and fewer children receiving language and learning support was also linked to higher achievement in reading.

The recommendations suggested by Eivers et al. (2010) are mainly centred on the school, but there is a recommendation for parents also. While acknowledging the curriculum overload at primary level, a suggestion to identify key cross-curricular skills and processes is made. It is also suggested that there should be more use made of self-regulated comprehension strategies. With regard to assessments in the classroom the report comments on the fact that in many schools these assessments are not being used for learning, just of learning. The results of standardised tests should be shared with parents at least once a year and they should be used at school level to identify areas of weakness that can be worked on.

The recommendations relating to learning support deal with the need for a more collaborative approach by principal and staff, and the need to increase in-class support. The DES (2009) noted that schools with higher levels of literacy were more likely to have in-class models of support.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is identified as another area which needs development. Eivers et al. (2009) suggest that schools should have a professional development plan linked to the needs of the school. They also recommend the need to up-skill teachers in the areas of the teaching of writing, of comprehension strategies and the use of multi-genre texts. The need for teacher professional development in ICT is also recommended.

With regard to parents and the wider community Eivers et al (2009) suggest that the DES ‘should initiate a public information campaign to advise parents about practices that help their child’s general academic development ... and about practices that do not’ (Eivers et al. 2009, p. 96).

**Report of the Inspectorate**

The *Incidental Inspection Findings 2010 - A Report on the Teaching and Learning of English and Mathematics in Primary Schools* broadly examined strengths and weaknesses in the standard of teaching and also raised issues for concern. The report was based on unannounced visits to over 450 primary schools between October 2009 and October 2010. Over 800 English lessons were observed, which was over 32% of all lessons inspected. Areas that were examined by the inspectors were quality of learning outcomes, teachers’ practices which comprised resources, learning activities and teaching approaches, ICT, assessment and preparation and planning. The following table shows some of the findings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas Assessed</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory Learning Outcomes</td>
<td>85.5%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate Teaching approaches</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative/Cooperative Learning</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory Preparation for lessons</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Plans</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory Assessment Practices</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While acknowledging the fact that English is well taught in the majority of classrooms, the DES Inspectorate (2010) concluded that teaching approaches used, preparation undertaken along with assessment practices of the teacher are the 'key determinants of the quality of pupils’ learning in English lessons' (DES Inspectorate, 2010, p. 9). They also focus on what they consider to be an unacceptably high level of unsatisfactory lessons taught. Over 14% of lessons seen by the inspectors during their incidental visits were considered unsatisfactory. They suggest the following:

To ensure better outcomes for learners, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy, weaknesses in preparation, assessment and teaching approaches must be tackled at classroom, school and system levels.


The DES Inspectorate (2010) stated that the weaknesses identified should be addressed urgently. They recommended the embedding of self-evaluation as a core strategy for bringing about school improvement in literacy and numeracy. They stated that the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms should be closely monitored and that effective assessment strategies should be used. They highlighted the key role of the principal teacher in working closely with teachers and in ensuring that they prepare properly for their lessons. They also recommended continuing professional development for teachers in literacy and numeracy and in the use of assessment. However, there is a marked absence of a specific commitment in regard to how professional development support is to be provided.

Even though the report found that the overall teaching of lessons was effective, the report found that in a minority of schools, teacher practice was less than satisfactory and this adversely impacted on the learning of the pupils. The ensuing media focus was on this 'minority' and failed to acknowledge the significant changes that have occurred in primary education – a revised but under-resourced curriculum, a changed classroom environment which includes children with special needs and newcomer children, large classes, the withdrawal of many crucial supports (RTT, VTT, EAL teachers, rural coordinators)3, reduction of grants, reduction of medical supports and services, poor accommodation. Little mention was made of the majority of teachers who, despite these challenges, enthusiastically embraced change.

The report's methodology should not go unchallenged. The report does not provide detail on how the subjectivity of the individual inspectors carrying out observations was addressed or how they were prepared for the process. It is the experience of teachers nationwide that different inspectors have different levels of expectation. There is a need for more transparency in relation to the inspectorate's understanding of 'very good practice' or 'competent learning'. The report does not provide detail on how the inspectorate arrived at their conclusions. The INTO is of the view that teachers will always strive to do what they do better and should be supported in so doing.

A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools

The findings of the inspectorate’s report on literacy and numeracy in primary schools, the report of the National Assessments (2009) and Ireland’s PISA 2009 results prompted the Department of Education and Skills to formulate The Draft National Plan to improve Literacy and Numeracy in School (DES 2010) in November 2010 and to

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3 Resource Teacher for Travellers (RTT), Visiting Teacher for Travellers (VTT), English as an Addition Language (EAL)
invite interested parties to make submissions in response to the draft plan. While acknowledging that Ireland has always been successful, by international standards, in numeracy and literacy assessments and that we as a nation have valued literacy, the Department warns us about becoming complacent and stated that 'good is no longer good enough' (DES, 2010, p.10). It reported that the levels of literacy skills of pupils in Irish primary schools have not improved in over thirty years according to National Assessments of English Reading. It also reported, as mentioned above, that inspections of primary schools have brought to light the fact that many English lessons evaluated were deemed unsatisfactory.

The publication of the Draft Plan for Literacy and Numeracy provoked debate among those both within and outside of the Education System. Following much consultation with its members, the INTO compiled a submission for the DES in early 2011. The consultation took the form of large meetings and focus groups at Branch and District Level. These were facilitated by District Committees and members of the Education Committee. A sub-committee, comprising members of the CEC, the Education Committee and Officials from Head Office, met on a number of occasions to discuss the Plan and to consider the feedback from the national consultation process within INTO. The consultation process informed the INTO’s submission to the Department regarding the draft national plan. While there were many aspects of the plan that had merit, the INTO was critical of the draft for its simplistic and technical view of education. The INTO was of the view that the draft plan treated literacy and numeracy in a reductive and narrow manner, which did not reflect Ireland’s education culture. The INTO noted the monolingual definition of literacy contained in the plan, the insufficient acknowledgement of socio-cultural issues in the development of literacy and numeracy, the overloaded nature of the Primary School Curriculum in terms of content objectives, the role children play in their own learning and the issue of resources. The INTO reiterated its support for a broad curriculum and rejected suggestions that the emphasis on the arts should be reduced, as referred to in the plan and warned against the overemphasis on testing as means to improve achievement in literacy and numeracy. The INTO reiterated its commitment to the following:

- ensuring that all children leave primary school with adequate numeracy and literacy skills,
- supporting the continuing professional development of teachers, and
- the empowerment of parents to be the primary educators of their children.

In total 480 written submissions were received by the Department and are available on its website www.education.ie. In addition, consultative meetings were held with over 60 groups, including the INTO. In general, there was a broad welcome for the plan, but many criticisms of its content and tone. The NCCA in its submission noted the draft plan’s lack of acknowledgement of the broader societal factors impacting on achievement, the monolingual definition of literacy, the absence of a focus on learner dispositions and of pupils with special educational needs. It was also critical of the notion of standards being developed separate to curriculum, and the proposals for assessment. However, the NCCA welcomed the focus and scope of the draft plan and the emphasis it placed upon partnership and inter-agency collaboration in seeking solutions to the challenges of literacy and numeracy in the system.

The focus was on the needs of the marginalised and deprived in the response of young ballymun, a community based initiative to help improve learning and well-being in the lives of the children and young people of Ballymun, a socially deprived area in north Dublin, where there is a high level of child poverty. One of its main criticisms of the draft plan was that it was unnecessarily restrictive in its understanding and approach to
tackling literacy challenges. *young ballymun* view literacy as a fundamental right and consider the role of the school vital. It argued, however, that the school must be contextualised in a strategy that activates the roles and resources of education support and development services, other agencies, both statutory and community, as well as the activation of the potential in the family in tackling the national literacy challenge (*young ballymun* 2011).

Ciarán Sugrue, in a hard-hitting article in response to the draft plan stated that ‘... the plan has resorted to a recipe language that would be unacceptable in an undergraduate essay...’ and that the lack of references and footnotes ‘... is unacceptable, and unbecoming of senior policy personnel’ (Sugrue, 2011). Sugrue (2011) also condemned a similar response by the British Government in relation to early reading in 2006, where policies were introduced to Primary Education in England with a lack of in-depth research. Sugrue also criticised the overemphasis on assessment and testing in the draft plan. He cites research to support his argument that the amount of testing suggested by the plan is over and above what is desired or indeed necessary. He claims this:

Such a narrow focus on test data leads to a cyclically reductionist policy cycle whereby a narrow evidentiary base becomes increasingly the exclusive basis of policy fine-tuning. Test scores can be improved but at the expense of improved levels of literacy and numeracy.

(Sugrue, 2011. p.16)

Sugrue (2011) notes that a potential strength of the plan is the emphasis on the need for continuity and co-operation between primary and post-primary schools and also the references to teaching and the need for more professional development in numeracy and literacy, particularly at the pre-service stage. He acknowledged as a strength the draft plan’s focus on supporting school leadership and self-evaluation as key to the success of literacy strategies. However, he also criticises the lack of reference to the need for committed resources to support the implementation of the proposals in the draft plan, an issue also identified by the INTO.

Kitching, responding to the draft plan, criticised the assumptions on which the plan was based, in addition to its tone and direction. He criticised the assumption that ‘education policy and ‘compensation for disadvantage’ measures are ‘all it takes’ to improve literacy and numeracy skills’, and the burden this places on schools and teachers while ignoring wider social and economic inequalities. He further argued that the plan doesn’t mention the development of critical literacy skills across the curriculum, and that ‘children and young people (particular in primary and post-primary) are framed as workhorses and recipients of strategy implementation and tests, rather than thinkers, questioners, innovators and creators’. He concluded by stating that the ‘relentless’ focus on literacy and numeracy was quite ill-conceived and the fact that literacy and numeracy are fundamentally social activities was ignored (Kitching, 2011).

**Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People**

Following consideration of all submissions the Department published *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* in July 2011. The Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn, T.D., acknowledged the commitment of these individuals and organisations, saying that he was heartened by the interest shown by people within and outside of the education system in the improvement of literacy and
numeracy skills in our society. The strategy took on board many of the points raised in submissions and it encompassed a broad definition of literacy, to include digital literacy: Traditionally we have thought about literacy as the skills of reading and writing; but today our understanding of literacy encompasses much more than that. Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media. Throughout this document, when we refer to ‘literacy’ we mean this broader understanding of the skill, including speaking and listening, as well as communication using not only traditional writing and print but also digital media.

(National Strategy to Improve Literacy, 2011, p. 8)

One area highlighted by the INTO, when making their submission, was the fact that there were two literacy backgrounds in Irish primary schools. This was acknowledged by the DES in the following paragraph, referring to the various linguistic settings of our schools:

This range of schools and settings and the opportunity to acquire literacy in both languages are part of the richness and strength of the Irish education system. It is also important to recognise that this diversity brings particular challenges for the teaching and learning of literacy.

(DES, 2011, p.11).

While the DES outlines its priorities with regard to literacy and numeracy on page 14 of the document, it does explain in the following paragraph that the implementation of these priorities is dependent on the economic climate. Some objectives of the DES are to set targets, clarify expectations, improve assessment and reporting, build the capacity of school leadership, continue the support to disadvantaged children, help parents and communities to support their children’s literacy and numeracy, and raise public awareness of their role in the improvement of literacy and numeracy.

In the document there is an acknowledgment of the importance of the role of parents and the wider community in the development of literacy in children and young people. The value of libraries is mentioned in this context. There is also an emphasis on the worth of early childhood education. The issues of initial teacher education, continuing professional development and school leadership are addressed. There is an acceptance that there is a need for realism when it comes to the breadth of the curriculum and an acknowledgement that the education system cannot be seen as the place where all the ills of society are dealt with. Literacy and numeracy have to be seen as priorities.

There is also a strong emphasis on the monitoring of pupil progress from primary to post-primary and a discussion on revising the Irish, English and mathematics curricula at primary level to include learning outcomes.

In the chapter entitled Helping Students with Additional Learning Needs to Achieve their Potential, there is a commitment to supporting children from economically deprived backgrounds. The work of the Education Research Centre is referred to in relation to its study into the successes or otherwise of the DEIS initiative. That study claims that the supports provided by the initiative are having a positive effect on many, but not all, schools in its remit.

There is also a commitment to continuing support for children with special needs and a strong recommendation for schools to use resources strategically to ensure their effectiveness is maximised. However, when it comes to children for whom English is an additional language, the document states that under the Value for Money (VFM) study it
was discovered that finance targeted at these pupils could be spent in a more productive fashion. In line with a successful initiative in the North of Ireland it is suggested that all class teachers, not alone dedicated language teachers, need to be up-skilled on how best to deal with these pupils. The INTO had consistently demanded professional development for class teachers in supporting children for whom English is an additional language. However, supporting class teachers should not be at the expense of reducing the need for language support teachers. The strategy appears to suggest the eventual abolition of dedicated EAL teachers and a shift of responsibility to the classroom teacher for children whose first language is not English.

The final chapter in the strategy deals with assessment. It puts forward the argument that ‘Improving the way in which we use student assessment can play a major role in improving literacy and numeracy learning’ (DES, 2011 p.73). It emphasises the need for assessment for learning (AFL) along with assessment of learning (AoL). It states the necessity of informing parents of the results of standardised tests and supports the idea of continuing professional development on assessment for all teachers and principals. It claims that better assessment data can help schools improve standards of literacy and numeracy and that ‘...effective schools use assessment information, including information about literacy and numeracy, to inform their school self-evaluation, reflective practices and their school improvement plans’ (DES, 2011 p.79).

The strategy sets out targets for the improvement of literacy and numeracy along with suggestions of how to achieve these targets. The following are the targets for improving literacy among Irish primary school pupils in the period 2011-2020:

- improve the oral-language competence of children in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings, using baseline data from assessments to inform the planning of learning goals;
- ensure that each school sets and monitors progress in achieving demanding but realistic targets for the improvement of literacy and numeracy skills of its students;
- increase the percentage of primary children performing at Level 3 and Level 4 (the highest levels) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5 per cent at both second class and sixth class by 2020;
- reduce the percentage of children performing at or below Level 1 (minimum) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5 per cent at both second class and sixth class by 2020;
- extend the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading to assess the performance of students at fourth class in primary school and at the end of second year in post-primary education;
- Use data from the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading at post primary level to establish the existing levels of achievement and to set realistic targets for improvement, similar to those adopted at the primary level;
- Foster a better culture of reading among children and young people.

A number of suggestions deemed necessary to achieve these targets are also set out, which include the improvement of professional practice for teachers, building the capacity of school leadership, promotion of a culture of continuous improvement in schools and more involvement of parents and communities in children’s literacy and numeracy.

A circular was issued to schools outlining the main aspects of the strategy and drawing schools’ attention to the changes required in the short-term.
Assessment and the National Literacy and Numeracy strategy

Assessment is at the very heart of teaching and learning (NCCA, 2005). The Primary School Curriculum 1999 reiterates the centrality of assessment to teaching and learning. It outlines the role of assessment in building a comprehensive picture of the short-term and long-term learning needs of the child so that the curriculum can be planned to meet the child's needs. The NCCA guidelines Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum (2007) place an emphasis on the differences and uses of both 'assessment for learning' and 'assessment of learning' which build on the four forms of assessment (Formative, Summative, Evaluative and Diagnostic) outlined in the Primary School Curriculum (1999):

- **assessment for learning (AfL)** is defined as gathering, interpreting and using information on an ongoing basis to make learning relevant and meaningful for children and to review teaching methodologies and strategies and curriculum planning. Teachers use the data from tests, work samples and/or from observation to plan learning.

- **assessment of learning (AoL)** involves periodically recording and reporting information on children's progress to parents, teachers and relevant bodies and for future planning.

The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, published in July 2011, supports both assessment for learning and assessment of learning. It sets out ambitious targets to be achieved in relation to literacy and numeracy by 2020. Its overall aim is to increase the percentage of primary children performing at Level 3 or higher (i.e. at the highest levels) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5 percentage points at both second class and sixth class by 2020.

The strategy proposes that 'clear statements of learning outcomes and accessible examples of what learners should know or be able to do in literacy' be clearly laid out at fixed intervals in a child’s education. It also envisages the use of these learning outcomes as benchmarks with which their progress can be measured. Hence the strategy is placing a much stronger emphasis on assessment and contends that 'improving the ways in which we use student assessment can play a major role in improving literacy and numeracy learning' (Literacy and Numeracy and Learning for Life, 2011, p.73).

In the past few years schools have been developing whole-school assessment policies and showing a marked increase in the use of regular standardised testing. Since December 2006, standardised testing is obligatory at end of first/beginning of second class and end of fourth/beginning of fifth class, though a significant number of schools are utilising standardised tests throughout the school. The strategy is demanding an increase in standardised testing in school. It calls for the development of assessment tools at the infant level and is instigating a requirement for all primary schools to administer standardised tests of English reading and mathematics to all eligible students at the end of second, fourth and sixth class. The recording of test results and reporting of these to parents have become part of school policies and have been almost universally adopted in primary schools.

The strategy acknowledges that assessment is a complex process and maintains that teachers should base their judgements about the progress pupils are making on different sources of evidence, including conversations with the learner, an analysis of the learner's own self-assessment, and the teacher's observations of the learner's engagement with tasks, test scores, and example of students work. The strategy also acknowledges the
limitations of standardised assessment. In its guidelines to schools the NCCA warned against over testing and advises teachers against the over-reliance upon a single test score. Factors that need to be considered include the following:

- A standardised test may measure a child’s performance on that test on that day, but this is not a certain measure of a child’s ability.
- There is a margin of error in standardised tests which means that the result may be in error to a certain degree above or below the child’s test score.
- Children’s performance on tests becomes more stable over time.
- Extraneous factors can affect the child’s performance on the test, for example the child may have been unwell, or particularly nervous.
- Coaching a child for the test will distort the outcomes.
- Despite the teacher’s vigilance, copying can occur.
- A child’s level of language development is a significant factor in test performance. For example, a child with poor reading skills may have difficulty in reading the text of mathematical questions. For children whose first language is not English, the test may be inappropriate.

As outlined in the strategy, schools will be obliged to discuss their aggregated test scores, at both staff level and board of management level, and to draw up plans for improvement. The strategy now purports that the aggregating of standardised test scores for students within different classes can help to inform a school’s planning, self-evaluation and external evaluation.

There is also a proposal to collect information on standardized tests from schools nationwide for quality assurance purposes and the identification of schools that may need additional supports. The aggregated information can also inform policy initiatives by helping the Department to have a better understanding of what is working well and what needs improving in children’s literacy and numeracy learning.

The strategy identified the gap in the transfer of information about students’ progress between early childhood settings and the primary schools and between primary schools and post-primary schools, creating potentially damaging discontinuities in learning. There is a growing trend of secondary schools seeking the results of standardized tests from primary schools. The strategy acknowledges that the timing of the transfer of information is important in order to ensure that no ‘stakes’ are attached and recommends that information should be transferred following the enrolment of pupils in the new school. Schools will be obliged to use the Report Card Templates prepared by the NCCA for reporting to parents, and should take different sources of evidence into account, including test scores, teacher comments and examples of pupils’ work. The transfer of information on pupils’ progress to post-primary schools should enable post-primary teachers to address more effectively the individual needs of students. However, the key issue is what information should be transferred, how it should be transferred, and for what purpose should it be used.

Assessment is at the core of the teaching/learning dynamic, and must at all times benefit the learner. Assessment information can also inform policy at national level. The INTO has consistently supported the National Assessment Programme in English Reading and mathematics, which take place every four years, and where schools randomly selected participated in standardised tests with a view to informing policy. The INTO has also supported Ireland’s involvement in international comparative assessments. As the implementation of the National Strategy to improve literacy and numeracy unfolds, the limitations of standardised testing must continue to be acknowledged. There is more to a child’s development than what can be assessed in standardised tests. It appears that
the strategy proposes to use assessment as a ‘blunt force’ to ensure perceived accountability for schools, without taking into account home and environmental factors that impact test scores.

The INTO is of the view that enhancing support for teachers in the use and interpretation of assessment information which is currently gathered is far more critical than increasing the amount of assessment, particularly standardised tests, undertaken.

**Concluding Comment**

This chapter summarised the main findings of the National Assessments (2009) and of the inspectorate’s report of 2010 on literacy in primary schools. This chapter also summarised the main points of the Government’s National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, and provided a critique of the draft plan which preceded the strategy. The final section of the chapter gave a brief overview of the role of assessment in enhancing literacy in schools and cautioned against over emphasising the importance of testing as a form of assessment.
Digital Literacy

Introduction

B eing literate in a real-world sense means being able to read and write using the media forms of the day. For centuries listening and speaking were the acceptable means of communication: written communication was controlled by the elite. The advent of the printing press placed an emphasis on the written word and empowered those who could read and write. However in recent times, literacy has taken on a broader meaning: because of inexpensive, easy to use and widely available new ‘tools’, technological literacy is a critical area in the future of our children (Ohler, 2009). Technology continues to expand and plays a bigger role in children’s education, whether through home or school PCs, mobile phones, online educational programmes or electronic libraries. Realising that our school curricula cannot keep pace with the amount of information that is available, education has expanded its definition of ‘education’ to become ‘less about knowledge residing in the head and more about learning the pathways to knowledge’ (Frechette, 2002 p.xvii) and ‘literacy’ to include Digital Reading Literacy needs.

Schools are now connected to the internet and have received grants to provide relevant digital equipment (laptops, digital projectors, interactive white boards). Many teachers are using software to support literacy programmes such as The Reading Coach and Word Shark. Students have the opportunity to present their work more professionally using photographs and video, and to a wider audience using internet sites such as Léargas (E-Twinning programme that organises international school projects), E-Leathanach (a weekly electronic current affairs newsletter published by Froebel College of Education to which pupils submit their opinions) and even online conferencing is an option. Online encyclopedias, dictionaries and class text books are now available in most classrooms.

IT usage, however, needs to be more than playing games on the computer or writing stories. Class teachers are encouraging more learning beyond the classroom, learning that is student driven where the teacher works in an advisory capacity and children are developing computer literacy where they begin to understand the nature and role of information, its legitimacy and how to make sense of it. The fundamental question is what is different about writing and reading text on a computer screen instead of on traditional materials such as paper? Do new technologies alter the fundamentals of language and of literacy and if so, are there consequences and implications for teaching and learning, and for the education system as a whole?

New Literacies

The new model of literacy encompasses a multiple of terms - digital literacy, ICT literacy, computer literacy, internet literacy, information literacy, and so forth, all often summed up as new literacies:
From some perspectives it might all seem quite familiar – just a matter of reading and writing on screens now, rather than on paper with pens and pencils. Indeed, if your conception of literacy is tied tightly to traditional print literacies, it may seem strange to even think about many of the things some researchers want to call new literacies as being about literacy at all.

(The Handbook of Research in New Literacies, 2008, p.26)

As new technologies emerge which are beginning to impact on the teaching/learning dynamic, changes are emerging in our concept of literacy:

Lawrence Lessig (2005), for example, talks about slices of digital animation, music, and video as the components of early 21st century literacies: the building blocks that young people use for encoding meanings …. He argues that for young people in first world countries these units of meaning making are, to a significant extent, the equivalent to what the letters of the alphabet were for their parents’ generation.

(The Handbook of Research in New Literacies, 2008, p.26)

It goes to the core of what we consider it means to be literate in the 21st Century, and makes it relevant that consideration be given at the outset to the emerging forms of literacy. According to Coiro (2009) when reporting on the PISA results in digital literacy, ‘It is therefore crucial to understand and assess the new forms of reading literacy that come with the practice of reading on digital displays’.

The term ‘digital literacy’ was first brought into the public domain in 1997 by Paul Gilster, who, in his book ‘Digital Literacy’ defined it as ‘the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers. The concept of literacy goes beyond simply being able to read; it has always meant the ability to read with meaning, and to understand. It is the fundamental act of cognition’ (Gilster, 1997, pp 1-2).

Through the following years, many commentators and researchers began to refine and develop the concept. In 2005, the DigEnLit project was set up with the goal of developing a European framework for digital literacy in relation to educational practice. This project defined digital literacy like this:

…it is the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process.


**ICT in Irish Schools**

ICT has been an element in Irish Schools for some years, and its growing importance has been widely acknowledged. The ICT in Schools Inspectorate Evaluation Studies (p.xi) stated that ‘in a relatively short period of time, ICT skills have become as fundamental to living a full life as being able to read, write and compute’.

The level of usage of ICT continues to increase in Irish primary classrooms, bringing with it a growing understanding of the concept of ICT literacy. In 2004, the NCCA published a consultative document ‘Curriculum Assessment and ICT in the Irish
Context: A Discussion Paper. The document stated that ‘All students will leave school as capable independent learners, able to use ICT confidently, creatively, and productively, able to communicate effectively, able to work collaboratively, and to critically evaluate, manage and use information’ (NCCA, 2004, p. 29).

The Revised Curriculum (1999) concerned itself with ICT as a tool in the teaching / learning process, and there developed a growing perception that its use entailed higher order thinking skills, important in the context of the primary school curriculum. Practical references to ICT were limited to technology available in the late nineties, referring particularly to word-processing in the English curriculum. The present ongoing re-interpretation of the primary school curriculum, must take into account the need to adapt it to the challenges arising from the use of new technology.

The NCCA recommends the use of ICT in education to enhance teaching and learning through a new dimension and to motivate and support students as independent learners as well as their engagement with collaborative exercises. The Framework for ICT in Curriculum and Assessment outlines the kinds of learning experiences that should be afforded to students to improve their knowledge, skills and attitudes. The NCCA states that ‘(ICT) is not presented as an add-on to teaching and learning but as a tool to help teachers to integrate ICT in teaching and learning. The Framework provides a guide to teachers for embedding ICT in curriculum and assessment’ (NCCA, ICT Framework – A structured approach to IT in Curriculum and Assessment, 2007, p4).

Programmes that integrate critical literacy skills to process digital text, for example, skimming/scanning and critically evaluating the credibility and relevance of the information to the task at hand have now become essential.

Digital literacy does not become a reality in our schools unless the teaching and learning process involves ICT. As outlined in the report Investing Effectively in Information and Communications Technology in Schools, 2008-2013, ‘we will only begin to make real and meaningful progress when the main focus shifts from the technology to its use by the learner. Appropriately integrated into what teachers do, ICT facilitates exploration, creativity and interdisciplinary work.’ This report went on to call for the following:

1. Continuing professional development
2. Software and digital content for learning and teaching
3. ICT equipment – additional and replacement
4. Schools broadband and services
5. Technical support and maintenance
6. Implementation structures and supports
7. Innovative practice and research

Although resources in many schools and classrooms may be seen as insufficient to reap fully the benefits of ICT in the classroom, the investment of €150 million announced in November 2009 has had a positive impact in ensuring that schools have access to ICT resources. However, that funding does not address continuing professional development, outlined as an issue by the strategy group in the report cited above. Supporting teachers’ engagement with the concept of digital literacy requires investment.

In the PISA 2009 report, the definition of reading literacy was ‘understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society’ (OECD, 2009, p.23). A digital literacy assessment was an optional dimension of PISA 2009, as digital texts are
considered to be a subset of written texts and there is a need for a proficiency in the
digital medium in the context of work and social, civic and personal life. Irish students’
ability to read computer-based text such as emails and websites ranked 8th (compared to
11th in the print reading assessment) internationally and was significantly above the
average of the other 19 OECD participating countries. Eight per cent of Irish students
scored at Level 5:

Students at this level can be regarded as ‘top performers’ in digital reading. They are able to
critically evaluate information from several web-based sources using criteria that they have
generated themselves. They are also able to navigate across multiple sites without explicit
direction, allowing them to locate information efficiently.

(Cosgrove et al. 2011. p.6)

However, there is no room for complacency. It is the strong performance of our lower-
achieving pupils that raises our average score among the OECD countries and we need
to question the knowledge, skills and motivation of the higher achievers. The low levels
of computer usage in key home and school contexts, and the lower levels of computer
usage at home for schoolwork, as reported by students are issues to be further explored.
There is no doubt that there is ‘considerable scope for increasing the engagement of
students in Ireland in purposeful digital literacy activities’ (Cosgrove et al, 2011 pp 9-12).
Ireland had the third highest gender difference relating to digital literacy. Socio-
economic background, the language of the home and engagement with reading print for
enjoyment also had significant effect on digital reading standards.

A report on Digital Literacy in Primary Schools (DLPS) - New Approaches to
Participation and Inquiry Learning to Foster Literacy Skills among Primary School
Children, was published in 2009 as a joint venture between The National College of
Ireland, The Education Research Centre in St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra and the
Digital Hub Agency. It examined the concept of digital literacy in Irish primary schools
in the light of real life classroom practices. The research project identified specific tasks
to be undertaken:

• Draw on emerging theories of literacy to develop a framework for conceptualising
digital literacy in the context of Irish primary education;
• Investigate digital media practices in primary school classroom contexts;
• Investigate the nature of pupil engagement and participation in digital media
practices to determine the adequacy and fit of the newly developed framework;
• Examine the connection between digital media practices and the development of
traditional (print) literacy skills.

The research was based on classroom observations and interviews with teachers and
principals from four schools in the vicinity of the Digital Hub in Dublin. The following
questions were addressed:

• How should we define digital literacy?
• How are teachers using digital technologies in the classroom?
• How can we relate digital media to instructional practice?
• How can we compare and relate digital literacy to print literacy?

According to the DLPS report, ‘the use of digital technology was generally observed as
embedded within structured learning activities directed at curriculum learning outcomes rather than as an end in itself. Teachers used tools such as the digital camera,
audio devices as well as classroom computers to engage pupils in different roles and to
facilitate inquiry learning and group work. Digital outputs such as photo-stories, podcasts and video served as project goals and were usually the culmination of a broad range of preparation and production activities’ (DLPS Report, 2009, p.9). It was also observed in the report that ‘a key element of the projects was the blending of print literacy teaching strategies with the use of digital tools’ (DLPS Report, 2009, p.91). The underpinning argument in the report was that ‘... the best way to consider digital literacy is to adopt the situated and social practice view of what literacy really means. In this approach literacy is seen as embedded in practice and less emphasis is placed on literacy as a set of skills’ (DLPS Report, 2009, p.6). The starting point was an understanding of literacy as not just a set of skills but as communication, as evident in the following quote:

What is digital literacy and why is it so important in the context of education in the 21st Century? When we use the term literacy in the everyday sense we often refer to a set of skills associated with the ability to read and write. But a deeper look shows that literacy is much more than isolated skills, and that it extends beyond reading and writing as usually conceived. Literacy implies the capacity to communicate meaning – from speaker to listener and from writer to reader - with all of the participants actively engaged in constructing that meaning. We find in today’s digital world that there are many forms of communication: text messaging, e-mail, pictures, and video are but a few.

(The Practice Profile of Inquiry: Connecting Digital Literacy and Pedagogy – Casey & Bruce, e-learning and Digital Media 8(1), pp76-85)

This statement is to take the concept of digital literacy beyond its obvious and superficial manifestation as specific technical skills and competences, which sees literacy as a set of skills, such as an ability to use a computer keyboard, to e-mail, and to understanding software and put it into the context of social practice (a situated approach) in which communication is the goal or key. The Primary School Curriculum 1999, encouraged teachers to exploit the potential of ICT to develop as wide a range of students’ skills as possible including the higher-order skills of problem-solving, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation. The DLPS report was therefore a timely review of the extent of ICT usage in primary schools a decade after the introduction of the curriculum. Based on their review of theory, they put forward a definition of digital literacy in the Irish primary school context:

Digital literacy in primary schools involves pupils and teachers using digital technology to enable, sustain and enrich all aspects of the inquiry cycle of learning as: ask, investigate, create, discuss and reflect.

(DLPS Report, 2009, p.7)

The inquiry cycle – ‘a model of the learning process that emphasises five dimensions or categories as - ask, investigate, create, discuss and reflect’, was promoted in the DLPS report. The report argued that ‘digital literacies should be considered as embedded in the pedagogic practices of primary school classrooms’ (p.10) and that teacher professional development should not centre on the technical competences necessary, but ‘that the emphasis should be placed on instructional strategies that harness digital technologies for learning outcomes’ (p.10). Technology lends itself to a high degree of participation in classroom work, and supports differentiation as learners are able to access it at their own levels. ICT can also support the development of skills such as collaboration, problem solving and effective presentation, which are all important skills in knowledge economies. Literacy skills and digital literacy are closely connected in everyday use. According to DLPS report, activities that involve the use of scripts, storyboards, captions and narrative are examples of situations where print
Literacy skills may be furthered through digital media activities (p.10). The full learning potential can be harnessed by teachers by actively pursuing opportunities for the integration of technology in classroom work. Therefore, digital literacy should not be seen as displacing the traditional literacy or skills and competences a learner needed to acquire to be considered literate. It is rather a development in our understanding of literacy itself, situated in real life contexts.

From the literacy-as-skills perspective, digital tools offer some new ways to enable the mechanics of reading and writing – for instance, a word processor can ‘cure’ untidy writing. From this perspective too, digital competences can be seen as a separate set of skills – knowing which buttons to press to achieve desired effects. However, literacy and the digital are more subtly bound together. The digital has given to literacy new means of expression and new means of understanding. But it has not changed the central social and cultural significance of literacy in its broadest sense.

(DLPS Report, 2009, p.19)

Digital literacy must be understood as being broader that the basic mechanical skills of being able to use a computer, digital camera, the internet, and the relevant software programmes. Researchers globally are beginning to identify the relevant skills. For example, Warschauer (2007) identified key skills that digital literacies can promote, including the ability to define what sorts of information are needed for a task; locate the needed information efficiently; evaluate information and its sources critically; incorporate selected information into one’s knowledge base; understand legal, social and economic issues around the use of information and access information ethically and legally.

Digital reading differs in some fundamentals from traditional print. The PISA 2009 reading framework (OECD, 2009b) points out that, while many of the skills required for print and digital reading are similar, digital reading demands some new emphases and strategies to be added to the reader’s repertoire. In devising PISA, the OECD needed to consider whether print and digital reading belong to the same construct. Navigation is emerging as a key skill, in a way which differs from the normal way print documents are accessed for content and information. In the case of indexing and retrieval, digital texts come with devices that let the reader navigate within and across pages of digital texts. Common devices used to navigate digital pages were the vertical and horizontal scroll bars, index tabs and expandable menu frames, devices which have no meaning in the world of printed text. However, their mastery and use is a component of the so-called ‘new literacies’ (Coiro, et al., 2008) typical of the electronic age. Skilled reading, navigation and information search in digital texts requires the reader to be familiar with explicit and embedded hyperlinks, nonlinear page structures, and global content representation devices and tools. Empirical evidence so far indicates that navigating digital texts is far from trivial, and may pose some challenges to certain categories of users, such as the elderly (Lin, 2004, cited in Coiro, et al., 2008).

Aside from the skills needed to access and understand documents, which need to be taught to learners, there are challenges for teachers concerning the understanding of what this technology entails from a pedagogical viewpoint, and what, if any, changes might need to be made in the ways we engage with learners, and in the way we teach and learn across the education system:

Digital media practices engage, sustain and enrich inquiry learning in primary schools. The real challenges and opportunities arising from new technology are pedagogical and not necessarily technical.

(DLPS Report, 2009, p.92)
Challenges

Functional literacy is a fundamental human right. If the education system is about preparing learners to take their place as functioning members of society, then it is essential that learners in the system and learners leaving the system are empowered to engage fully with all the literacies and competencies they will need in life:

... digital technologies deeply affect the shape, content and life-cycle of texts and, consequently, the very nature of reading. It is important for governments and societies to understand these changes as they have begun to affect, in turn, almost every aspect of life in society, including government, education, work, commerce and civic life. To cite just a few examples: more and more taxpayers fill in online forms; students search the web for information; jobseekers look up ads on employment websites; consumers order goods in online stores; and people build and maintain social communities on line. All these activities, and many others, require the production, dissemination, and reading of some type of text.

(PISA 2009 Results: Students On-Line Digital Technologies and Performance)

It has been observable from the time ICT was first introduced into classrooms that the learners are often more able than the teachers when it comes to technology. Confidence may be a receding issue with teachers, but is still a background consideration, and many teachers are still uncomfortable using the digital tools with which they have been equipped.

Digital literacy is regarded as enabling, sustaining and enriching inquiry hence problems with digital literacy are manifest when technology limits and inhibits inquiry. One can speculate that this can occur for a variety of reasons: teachers’ or pupils’ technical skills may be limited, teachers may lack the technical skills but also lack the confidence to illicit support from more able pupils, teachers may be in awe of the technology or be uncomfortable with the prospect of allowing pupils use digital tools (e.g. a digital camera) on their own (fear of breakage, classroom management, privacy issues). Regardless of the issues, the emphasis for teacher training, professional development and school spending policy should be to bring about conditions in the classroom where digital tools may be used supportively and as a valuable resource for inquiry.

(Casey, Leo, & Bruce, Bertram C. (2011). The practice profile of inquiry: Connecting digital literacy and pedagogy. E-Learning and Digital Media)

The seemingly natural competence which pupils often show in using digital tools is fostered by their use of the technologies outside of the classroom, often in their homes. This situation is giving rise to what some observers and researchers are calling ‘the hidden curriculum’ (Jenkins et al, 2006). Crucially, some homes and therefore some learners are more equipped than others. Learners may be accessing information in their own time, without having skills of evaluating and filtering what they find. There are differing opinions regarding which aspects of the media are important to literacy, ranging from the ability to use the tools of technology for production to critical consumption and there is a concern regarding the current provision, scope and quality of digital literacy (Coleman, 2005). According to the British Educational and Communications Technology Agency (BECTA), a digital divide may be growing between those who have critical media skills and those who don’t. The challenge for educators is to explore and examine what needs to be done, to address the potential digital divide and to embrace these new technologies. Digital tools are now part of the fabric of our world, requiring skills broader than those traditionally taught.
Learning in a digital age, where literacy is not confined to technical processes of reading, writing and numeracy, requires independent critical thinking and collaborative problem solving (Leadbeater, 2010). New literacies are not about replacing existing literacies, in that reading, writing and numeracy are crucial skills for full participation in a digital society and knowledge economy (BECTA). New models of literacies can change the way we think and understand our world.

**Concluding comment**

The world has changed significantly since the revised Primary School Curriculum was introduced in 1999. This chapter has outlined developments associated with digital literacy. Information is not as static as it used to be, when books might have taken months or years to be published. Throughout the education system, the way learners engage with teachers, and the evolving nature of on-line teaching and learning has impacted on the world of teachers and learners. Learners are acquiring the skills needed to fully engage with all the models of learning. Children today need be competent in using new forms of communication, such as the internet and electronic media. They still require comprehension and written skills to deal with different genres and new forms of text.

Attempts are being made worldwide to identify what competences and skills are needed in a digital age. For example, the Australian Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affair (MCEETYA) identified the following ICT literacies:

- Accessing info (identification, retrieval)
- Managing info (organising, storing)
- Evaluating info (integrity, relevance, usefulness)
- New understandings (creating knowledge, authoring)
- Communicating with others (sharing, creating products)
- Using ICT appropriately (critical, reflective, strategic, ethics, legal)

(MCEETYA, 2007, National Assessment Program -- ICT Literacy)

Language-processing skills need to be supplemented with visuospatial skills when dealing with digital literacy (Pazzaglia, *et al.*, 2008; cited in PISA 2009 Results: Students On Line Digital Technologies and Performance), though the core processes of reading and understanding are similar across all media. Educators need to address the skills that are needed, and to foster these skills in our learners to ensure the future generation is digitally literate. Therefore, professional development for teachers is vital. The roll out of funding for ICT in Irish primary schools was not accompanied by any direct investment in teacher’s continuing professional development. In general, it was left to teachers themselves to update their skills to cope with this new and emerging technology, creating a potential ‘digital divide’ between those teachers who can and those who cannot use new technologies. As outlined in PISA it is important for policy-makers and educators to become involved in the following:

- Understanding the nature of digital reading;
- Examining students’ performance in digital reading and address significant disparities that exist among selected populations, both within and across countries; and
- Identifying the influences on digital reading performance and design effective policy responses that leverage these, for example, through better access to ICT and training for both students and teachers.

(PISA 2009 Results: Students On-Line Digital Technologies and Performance)
Literacy and Disadvantage

Within Irish primary education low levels of achievement in literacy for children experiencing social and economic disadvantage are a continuing concern for educators and present an ongoing challenge to policy and practice aimed at addressing educational disadvantage. Studies have shown that children attending schools in areas designated as disadvantaged have significantly lower average reading achievement scores than their counterparts in schools in non-designated areas (Archer and O’Flaherty, 1991; Cosgrave et al., 2002). Recent research has again provided evidence of the high levels of literacy difficulties being experienced by children in designated disadvantaged schools. There are very strong links between test scores and socio-economic status (SES) and some of the strongest links found related to family background characteristics (Eivers, Close, Sheil, Millar, Clerkin, Gileece, and Kiniry, 2010). This recent study shows little improvement on standardised tests in English reading in designated disadvantaged schools since 2004 when 27% of first and sixth class children and 30% of third class children performed at, or below the tenth percentile compared to 10% of pupils at all levels from the representative sample (Eivers, Sheil and Shortt, 2004). That survey also showed a clear correlation between the frequency with which parents read to their children prior to starting school and while in junior infants and later achievement in literacy.

Impact of low literacy attainment

It is widely documented that literacy is essential for life in the 21st century and that it brings social, economic and health benefits to the individual and to society as a whole. Children who do not learn to read, write and communicate effectively at primary level are more likely to leave school early, be unemployed or be in low-skilled jobs, have poorer emotional and physical health and are more likely to end up in poverty and in our prisons (Barnardos, 2009; KPMG Foundation, 2006). There is a strong body of literature on interventions for children whose potential for achievement is at risk for reasons of socio-economic disadvantage. Within that literature, there is a consensus that children and their families need meaningful programmes of intervention involving a range of supports that must be in place early in the children’s lives and must focus on the children themselves, their families and communities (McGough, 2007).

We know that low levels of achievement in the core areas of reading in primary school will inhibit children’s learning across the wider curriculum and will place them at a serious disadvantage relative to most of their middle-class peers. We know too that this disadvantage results in early school leaving and in poor or no second-level qualifications. On the other hand, the positive link between educational attainment and employment means that education continues to be one of the central agents for personal advancement within society. In that context, education is potentially a force for equalising opportunity. However, this potential can only be realised when the relationship between education and equality is seen not just in terms of access to and participation in the education system but in terms of opportunity for achievement within the system (Kellegahan, Weir, Ó hUallacháin and Morgan, 1995).
The language of schooling

Schleppegrell (2001) analysed the features of school-based language in relation to its specific use and function in school contexts. Findings suggest that if academic success is to be ensured the expectations of the school are that oral discourse skills, reading and writing texts must be presented authoritatively and in conventionally structured ways. Consequently, a child’s ability to use interactive or conversational language only alienates, and from the start of their schooling, places some students at a disadvantage; the language-use expected for ‘doing schooling’ is presented as being elaborate and academic comprising certain grammatical and lexical characteristics. Furthermore, according to Michaels, teachers consider young children who are unable to use the explicit language expected by school to be ‘disorganised’ and are not easily guided towards further development in the use of the expected ‘school’ language (cited in Schleppegrell, 2001).

Therefore, the question must be posed: do schools tend to confuse linguistic inappropriateness or indeed inability to comply with school expectations with lack of cognitive skills? If so, it could imply the child’s inability to cope with school whereas the school’s inability to cope with the ‘disadvantaged’ child is also an issue that merits consideration. Educators need to reflect on such issues with a view to transforming educational practice and teachers are well placed to influence this by creating opportunities to expose young children to experience and learn about the conventions for language use in schools: this is important especially since it is deemed crucial for academic success. Schleppegrell acknowledges that some students never achieve the linguistic expectations of school continuing to use ordinary frequently-used vocabulary. Enabling pupils who have the cognitive capacity to do so/to use academic discourse skills is a complex issue and teachers in schools designated disadvantaged particularly, need to be cognizant of such findings when planning to meet the varying early language and literacy needs of all its pupils.

Socio-economic disadvantage and language development

Children from low SES backgrounds appear to have poorer vocabularies (Hart and Risley, 1995), use less complicated language structures (Snow, 1999), are less likely to consider and analyse language appropriately when given instructions (Donaldson, 1978) than more socio-economically advantaged peers. A significant finding from Hart and Risley’s (1995) two-and-a-half year longitudinal study of children from diverse SES backgrounds in the US was that when the parent/child talk was analysed on a sentence by sentence basis, the richness and quality of individual parents’ utterances across the SES groupings were almost the same for all groupings. This indicates that linguistic interaction between parents and their young children does not require highly sophisticated vocabulary, complicated syntax or grammar and that all parents regardless of SES, have the prerequisite language skills to provide their young children with a rich linguistic experience. However, their findings show that children from lower SES homes do not experience the same amount of linguistic interaction as do their more advantaged peers.

Oral language and reading literacy in disadvantaged settings

There is a strong relationship between oral language knowledge and the successful acquisition of reading comprehension literacy skills. While a number of the planned measures to address literacy are welcome the absence of an appropriate emphasis on children’s oral language development has been a serious concern over the years.
Developing prerequisite oral language skills from the earliest years is considered to be of critical importance in disadvantaged contexts. Dickinson and Neuman (2003) provide evidence of the central role of oral language in supporting reading. The oral language skills of preschool children are strong predictors of children’s third grade reading comprehension according to Sénéchal, Ouellette and Rodney (2005) and the relationships between oral language ability and reading are seen to continue to be strong into the high school years (Wood, Hill, Meyer, and Flowers, 2005). Equally, there is a growing research emphasis on the specific link between children’s oral discourse skills and achievements in literacy (Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, Palmer, and Wolf, 2004). For example, children with wide vocabulary have greater phonological sensitivity than children with restricted word knowledge and there is strong correlation between vocabulary size and proficiency in phonological sensitivity and alphabet knowledge in young children according to Whitehurst and Lonegan (2002).

**Early childhood experiences and emergent language/literacy**

According to Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) emergent literacy relates to experiences, skills and knowledge beyond what the developmental level can predict. In relation to emergent literacy, early childhood settings and family context are perhaps the two most important predictable factors. A growing body of evidence shows that the quality of young children’s preschool language environment is critical for their language and literacy development (Dickinson and Neuman, 2006). Young children who attend high-quality pre-school that provide rich opportunities for literacy learning score higher in tests of language and literacy than their peers who do not attend such programs (Barnett, Lamy and Jung, as cited in Caspe, 2009).

**Emergent literacy and family context**

Within the abundance and varying information sources related to emergent literacy, several underlying factors emerge. According to Zeece and Wallace (2009) families and family environment influence the emergent literacy skills of young children: and teachers who facilitate literacy-related activities that are intentional, well-conceptualised and implemented in collaboration with parents are providing meaningful literacy experiences for young learners. Molfese, Modglin, Beswick, Neimon, Berg and Berg (as cited in Zeece and Wallace 2009) found that the benefits of developing such activities may also support overall family literacy which is a key recommendation in the NESF report (2010). School-supported parent/child story book-sharing interactions can vary in style and frequency but studies have demonstrated that even modest literacy-promoting interventions can significantly enhance a young child’s early literacy environment by increasing the frequency of parent-child book sharing activities (Weitzman, Roy, Walls, and Tomlin, 2004).

**Influences of family context**

Lopez, Barreueco, Feinauer, and Miles (2007) examined the various pathways through which aspects of the family context influence young children’s language and literacy development. Variables such as socioeconomic status, parent education, and immigration status are all related to literacy outcomes. For example, children from low-income homes whose parents have low levels of education are at risk for early reading failure (Magnuson and Duncan, 2006). Similarly, variables, such as family literacy practices, beliefs about literacy and involvement in children’s learning are also related to literacy outcomes (Saracho, 2007). Parent/child story book-sharing is considered an important family activity related to literacy development because, for example, adults
talk in more complex ways when using picture books and tend to use more de-contextualized language than they would otherwise (Raikes, Luze, Brooks-Gunne, Raikes, Tamis-LeMonda, 2006).

**Parental engagement in book sharing in early years**

Home reading experiences contribute positively to children’s acquisition of oral language and emergent literacy abilities according to Leseman and de Jong (as cited in Caspe, 2009). Many studies highlight the impact of parent/child book sharing in early years as being an important predictor of children’s later language, literacy and academic achievements (Bus, Ijzendoorn and Pellegrini, 1995). St. Pierre, Ricciuti, and Rimdzius argue that engaging with young children in literacy activities at home is one way that families can both augment and enrich the home literacy setting and participate in their children's early learning (cited in Zeece & Wallace, 2009).

Having reviewed a series of studies of children from pre-school to third grade Sénéchal (2006) found that book-sharing with children is an activity that should be encouraged as it brings children in contact with concepts that can be more diverse than those introduced during every day conversations.

**Quality of reading interactions**

Current research on shared book reading indicates that it is the quality of these reading interactions that has the greatest impact on children’s literacy development (DeTong and Bus, 2002; Reese and Cox, 1999). Quality needs to be a hallmark of this intervention as in general parents’ understandings of the value of sharing books with their young children tends to be limited. Furthermore, parental knowledge of any discrepancy between the home/community language and the language expected by schools and/or needed to achieve academic success as described by Schleppegrel (2001) tends not to be evident. According to Dickinson and Smith (2004) the best teachers invite parents to become meaningful collaborators in a process whereby they are supported to become facilitators of interactive oral discourse with their child at home. Schools must lead in this regard and this intervention aims to do that.

**Intervention Programmes introduced to combat poor numeracy and literacy levels in Irish schools**

In the last decades of the 20th century various intervention programmes were implemented in schools perceived as disadvantaged, in order to alleviate the challenges associated with socio-economic and educational disadvantage and to support improvements in educational attainment, in particular in literacy and numeracy. Until 1994, schools with disadvantaged status benefited from being allocated one exquota concessionary teacher and extra funding per child. Home School Community liaison teachers were also introduced to schools designated as disadvantaged. However, a number of additional initiatives have been introduced since then.

*Breaking the Cycle* and *Giving the Children an Even Break* were schemes which were introduced to allocate more funding to disadvantaged schools and to support the reduction of the pupil-teacher ratio. The *Breaking the Cycle of Educational Disadvantage Project* was launched in 1996. In urban disadvantaged schools the pupil teacher ratio at the junior level classes (infants to second class) was reduced to 15:1. At the senior classes the ratio was 27:1. In rural areas a teacher or coordinator was
appointed to a cluster of schools. Here was seen for the first time ‘positive discrimination’ as suggested by Kellaghan et al (1995, p.7).

The *Giving Children an Even Break* scheme was launched in 2001. It subsumed the previous schemes but was more widespread than *Breaking the Cycle*. Schools not in the previous scheme were allocated additional funding and benefited from a reduction in their pupil teacher ratio. Urban schools were to have a ratio of 20:1 in the junior classes and 27:1 in the senior classes. Again, rural schools were allocated an extra teacher to a cluster of schools. There was, however, more accountability involved for the schools in the *Giving Children an Even Break* scheme. A three-year development plan had to be created within the school. This was to include collaboration and planning with outside agencies. The scheme included means of identification of children with special needs and support systems involving parents were to be established.

Weir (2004) was critical of some aspects of the *Giving Children an Even Break* scheme. According to the DES website the scheme was to be planned, reviewed and independently evaluated, but Weir (2004) states that, apart from her own examination, no such exercise had taken place. The means by which resources were being used was not clearly examined. However, Weir (2004) does acknowledge that many of the practical aspects of the scheme were implemented. In other words, the financial resources were put in place and many schools who applied benefited from new teaching appointments. Weir (2004) also criticised the lack of professional development for teachers with reduced class numbers, and the absence of support teams for participating schools.

**DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools)**

DEIS is the newest initiative with the aim of tackling disadvantage in Irish schools. At first glance, it would appear to be the most comprehensive and far-seeing of all the policies implemented in this area over the last twenty years or so. The policy document was published in May 2005 and the introduction of the programme began the following school year. The DEIS Action Plan was the response to a study undertaken by the Educational Disadvantage Committee in 2003 at the request of the Minister for Education and Science. Their report, entitled *A More Integrated and Effective Delivery of School-Based Educational Inclusion Measures*, stresses the following:

> … the need to improve methods of identification of schools and targeting of resources, with a greater emphasis on more flexible, planned and integrated responses at local level and enhanced support for teachers and schools in planning, monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of educational inclusion measures.

(Department of Education and Science, 2005, p.9).

Building on research and studies of the previous intervention policies and programmes, the Department of Education and Science (2005) produced a policy in DEIS which appears comprehensive and visionary. Its philosophy is simple and its focus is clear:

- every child and young person deserves an equal chance to access, participate in and benefit from education
- each person should have the opportunity to reach her/his full educational potential for personal, social and economic reason and
- education is a critical factor in promoting social inclusion and economic development

(Department of Education and Science, 2005, p.7).
DEIS was to focus on ‘... addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education (3 to 18 years)’ (Department of Education and Science, 2005, p.7).

So what makes DEIS different from all previous policy initiatives? Research into the existing policies identified strengths and weaknesses which were taken into consideration when designing the new Action Plan. An important element of the plan is the identifying and regular reviewing of levels of disadvantage. Another important element of DEIS was the bringing together and building on the existing schemes over a five-year timeframe. From the point of view of the schools involved in DEIS, there is more accountability expected, and means of measuring the scheme’s successes have been established. Under Breaking the Cycle and Giving Children an Even Break, funding was given and pupil teacher ratio reduced, but no means of measuring success in literacy or numeracy was available. On the other hand, schools had to accept conditions before they were considered eligible for DEIS. The following are just some of the conditions laid down which affect the daily running of the primary school designated DEIS:

- Extra focus on the development of literacy and numeracy skills;
- A renewed emphasis on the involvement of parents and families in their children’s education;
- Extra professional development arrangements;
- Measures to be implemented within the schools to improve attendance.

For the teacher in the classroom the extra focus on literacy and numeracy involves the introduction of the First Steps in Literacy Programme and Ready, Steady, Go Maths. In First Steps the programme includes means by which teachers can monitor the pupils’ progress in oral language, reading, writing and spelling. All DEIS schools have received, and continue to receive, inservice training in how to implement First Steps in the classroom. In addition, the Reading Recovery Programme, an early intervention programme directed at children with reading difficulties, and which requires intensive one-to-one teaching, has been introduced.

According to the Department of Education and Science all those working in disadvantaged schools were to have access to professional development ‘to enable them to successfully implement the new approaches required and to make optimal use of the supplementary resources made available through the SSP\(^4\) (DES, 2005, p.61). This professional development programme carried out in schools includes demonstration lessons by external personnel from the support services. Teachers are expected to be directly involved in analysing teaching and learning, and provision was to be made for the mentoring of newly qualified teachers.

Kennedy (2009) states that up until that time research had indicated that policies (with the exception of DEIS,) which were designed to narrow the gap between achievement of children attending designated disadvantaged schools, and those attending non-designated schools had been largely unsuccessful in their objectives.

Archer and Weir (2004) looked at strategies used in Ireland to tackle disadvantage in light of their review of international literature. In examining strategies for improving literacy they focused on Success for All and Reading Recovery. According to Archer and Weir (2004) Success for All is an initiative embedded in a programme for comprehensive school reform. It places emphasis on phonics and meaning focused

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\(^4\) School Support Programme
instruction. Aside from its curricular features, which strive to improve reading levels in pupils, the initiative promotes high expectation and encourages the inclusion of family and community support. Professional development is available to staff. A reduction in class-size is not part of the initiative, though it is unclear what the average was in schools participating in the initiative. Pupils are taught in small groups within their classes, and those that require it are withdrawn from class and given one-to-one tuition. Citing Slavin and Madden (2003) and Borman et al. (2003), Archer and Weir (2004) conclude the Success for All has varying effectiveness. Schools that adopt the full model of the programme and those using it for five years or more display the most success. However, Archer and Weir (2004) concluded that the Reading Recovery programme, while successful in bringing many low achievers up to par with their contemporaries, many of the gains achieved were lost once the pupils discontinued the programme.

It is unclear why Success for All has never been considered for implementation in Ireland. Reading Recovery, despite the contested nature of its benefits, the cost and the intensity of labour involved, is widespread in disadvantaged schools in Ireland as a means of tackling low literacy levels among disadvantaged children.

### Reading Standards in Ireland

Shiel (2007) examines three studies which assessed reading standards of Irish students during the first decade of the 21st Century. From the Study of Reading in Designated Disadvantaged Schools, which was carried out in 2003, it was discovered that the reading standards of pupils in these schools were poor. A total of 30% of pupils at third class fell at or below the 10th percentile. The norm at this level would be 10%. Only 3% of pupils scored at or above the 90th percentile, the norm being 10%. The average score of the pupils in third class in disadvantaged schools was over two thirds of a standard deviation below the national mean. When surveyed, teachers of third class indicated that 4% of their pupils would not be able to cope with literacy in secondary school and that a further 24% would need learning support on an ongoing basis. However, teachers believed that 41% would cope adequately and that 31% would cope well.

During the study a number of factors were identified which distinguished more able from less able readers in disadvantaged schools. These included gender (females generally achieved better), number of books in the home (those with fewer books did less well), number of siblings (the fewer siblings the better the pupil fared), and attendance, where those attending school more regularly did better.

Shiel (2007) also comments on The National Assessment of English Reading (NAER) 2004. He compares the findings with a similar study which took place in 1998. No difference in the overall reading was discovered between pupils of 5th class in 1998 and those in 5th class in 2004. A number of ‘at risk’ groups of pupils were identified. These included pupils in designated disadvantaged schools, traveller children, children of lone-parents, pupils coming from large families and pupils with high absenteeism. These pupils are considered to contribute to some degree to the slow progress of raising the standards of assessment outcomes in Irish schools.

### Evaluation of DEIS

In their examination of the achievements of children in rural disadvantaged schools Archer, P., Miller, D. and Weir, S. (2009), discovered that the children attending rural schools performed significantly better than their peers in urban disadvantaged schools. While this conclusion in itself is interesting, Archer et al. (2009) admit that further research into the factors influencing the better outcomes needs to be undertaken. For
example, they wonder if rural parents who are poor have better ability to cope with their child’s education than urban parents who are poor. They also question whether teachers in rural schools place more emphasis on literacy and numeracy than their urban colleagues. They discount the idea that higher achievement in rural areas can be explained by the lower concentration of poverty or school size.5

Lessons from a School where Literacy Thrives

Kennedy (2009) conducted action research in a DEIS school and with the collaboration of the teaching staff brought about some profound changes in literacy levels in the school. Over a two year period professional development took place, mainly on the school campus. The teachers were not subjected to following a particular programme but the sessions built on the expertise that the teachers already had:

... teachers were active in shaping the direction of the change process throughout the two years. Their autonomy and creativity was honoured and encouraged, as together with the researcher, a coherent, effective and systematic balanced literacy framework was constructed ... capitalised on children’s interests while also fostering their impulse to read and write and to view reading and writing as vehicles for the realisation of personal goals

(Kennedy, 2009, p.13).

While there were impressive gains among the pupils in reading, writing and spelling, other changes were also noted. The children became more engaged and motivated with regard to literacy. Their knowledge of literacy strategies and their independence increased. Children began to perceive themselves as readers and writers inside and outside the home. It was discovered, through interviews with parents, that the pupils were having an influence on literacy development in their own home environments.

While acknowledging the gains made by the pupils in the school, Kennedy (2009) concedes that ‘these positive outcomes were achieved through the interaction of a complex range of factors’ (Kennedy, 2009, p.23). She credits the balanced literacy framework which was developed through collaborative professional development, how teachers became encouraged at the improvement of the pupils’ motivation and engagement, and the general co-operation in the school for the positive outcomes.

The Report of National Economic and Social Forum (NESF)

The NESF report (2009) Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues focuses on how the DEIS programme is being implemented in schools across the country and the main concerns have arisen. While acknowledging that DEIS is a well designed policy, the NESF (2009) identifies a number of weaknesses in its implementation. Firstly, a number of services originally planned were not rolled out within the planned time-frame and in some cases not rolled out at all. Many supports such as after-schools clubs, summer camps and pre-school services are limited. Community links and family literacy initiatives are also weaker than originally intended.

Secondly, while schools have targets, these are set largely by the schools themselves with no direct link between the school target and the national targets. NESF also contends that there is no incentive to achieve the targets. Moreover, schools are left to decide themselves what a successful outcome is in terms of literacy levels for their pupils. The NESF (2009) believes that

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5 The evaluation of the urban dimension of DEIS was not completed until 2013

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Literacy in a Changing World 52
… when schools operate … a whole school approach to literacy teaching and integrate DEIS supports into the school culture that they can find success in meeting the significant literacy challenges they face in disadvantaged communities.

(NESF, 2009, p. IX)

The NESF also state that ‘it is clear from international evidence that creating a positive ‘can do’ organisational culture is predictive of ultimate success in policy making’ (NESF, 2009, p. X). NESF reiterates the point that there have been no improvements in literacy levels in Ireland since the 1980s, a phenomenon mirrored in other OECD countries. The report also refers to the fact that in Ireland 30% of children in disadvantaged areas have serious literacy problems. It also indicates that DEIS is not reaching all disadvantaged children.

The economic and individual costs for not dealing with the problems are outlined. These include the fact that literacy is central to economic growth as Ireland depends on a literate and educated workforce in a knowledge based economy. Studies of prison inmates point to a strong correlation between low literacy levels and antisocial behaviour. Poor literacy levels in adults were also found to be linked with poor physical and mental health.

The NESF (2009) notes the impact that school culture and school leadership have on learning. It refers to the idea that schools that have strong learning communities are more successful when it comes to national assessments and adapt to change more effectively. Citing a study by the Hay Group (2004), the NESF (2009) outlines some characteristics of successful schools. Among these are the school’s high ambitions for its pupils, its focus on learning inputs, promotion of teamwork and collaboration, lack of tolerance for failure among staff and its value on discipline and reliability. The crucial role of school leadership is mentioned. There is a growing awareness of the influence that the school principal has on learning and teaching in schools. Second to the class-teacher the school principal has the greatest impact on the pupils’ learning (NESF, 2009). The empowerment of teachers and collaboration among staff, as led by the principal, is seen as a powerful means of improving school culture.

The central recommendation of the report is the establishment of a National Literacy Policy Framework. Other recommendations relate to the provision of quality early childhood education, an emphasis on oral language, school based actions such as the prioritisation of literacy, particularly in disadvantaged schools, support for schools, mainly in the areas of professional development, community initiatives and the establishment of a steering committee under the auspices of the Department of Education.

**Concluding Comment**

This chapter explores the challenges associated with literacy in schools that are designated educationally disadvantaged. Pupils experiencing social and economic disadvantage do not achieve as well as their more advantaged peers in literacy, as evident in national assessments. There are particular challenges associated with the language of schooling, early childhood and emergent language experiences, and parental engagement. The chapter describes the various intervention programmes to support schools designated as disadvantaged in improving the literacy achievement of pupils. These programmes which include *First Steps* and *Reading Recovery* are widely used in schools participating in DEIS, which is the most recent school support programme for schools designated as disadvantaged. Initial indications are that DEIS is successful in enhancing literacy achievement.
Literacy and Special Educational Needs

Introduction

The focus in this chapter will be on literacy from the perspective of children with special educational needs (SEN). As noted by Griffin and Shevlin, working in special education in Ireland is both exciting and challenging at this point in time:

Over a relatively short period of time we have witnessed enormous changes in how we think about special education and how we believe special education should be delivered in our schools. In the past, special education was seen as the exclusive preserve of dedicated professionals who looked after the needs of children and young people who had disabilities. These children were often educated separately from their peers in separate schools and institutions. As a result, there was little contact or interaction between these children and their peers in the community or even between professionals in special education and their counterparts in mainstream settings.

(Griffin and Shevlin, 2007, p. 1)

Emphasis in recent years on the promotion of more inclusive forms of education, not just in Ireland but on a worldwide basis, has changed the educational landscape significantly. In the Irish context, various official government reports and policy documents have had a profound influence on how we perceive and approach special education. It is against this background of change in the educational landscape that we must consider the whole area of Literacy and Special Educational Needs.

What do we understand by the term ‘Special Educational Needs’?

The term ‘special educational needs’ covers a number of different possibilities, indicating that students cannot integrate fully into a mainstream school environment without special treatment and specific interventions related to their needs. Special education generally refers to the educational requirements of children who have physical disorders or disabilities including hearing and sight impairment, emotional distress, psychiatric disorders, behavioural disorders and also learning disorders such as, for example, ADHD. Special Educational techniques are needed when it is generally considered that traditional and more usual approaches will not be sufficient to meet their educational needs. Griffin and Shevlin stress that it is important to make a distinction between the terms ‘disability’ and ‘special educational need’:

Essentially, ‘special educational needs’ is a school-focussed term that refers to difficulties in learning experienced by a number of children. A child with a disability may require technical support to access the curriculum and/or reasonable accommodation in taking examinations. This is clearly not a learning need, but rather highlights an access deficit. Our traditional
way of categorising children with disabilities and providing separate education according to category of disability has undoubtedly contributed to this confusion.

(Griffin and Shevlin, 2007, p.6)

A broad definition of special educational needs will be taken, however, in this chapter - one which encompasses significant difficulty with learning as it relates to literacy and/or which calls for special educational provision to be made for that child. It will include consideration of what the DES have termed 'high incidence needs' and 'low incidence needs' (Circular Sp Ed 02 05; DES). The following citation from Westwood (2003: p.1) is a useful starting point:

A child has special educational needs if he or she has a learning difficulty that calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her. A child has a learning difficulty if he or she has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age, or has a disability which prevents or hinders the child from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of the same age in schools within the area of the local education authority.

(adapted from Education Act 1996, Section 312, cited in Frederickson and Cline 2002:35)

**SEN and the Irish Context**

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC Report, 1993) points out that the beginnings of special educational provision in Ireland can be traced back to middle of the nineteenth century. In common with many countries, special educational services were first set up to cater for the special needs of children with hearing or visual impairments. Services for children with intellectual and physical disabilities were slower to develop – while some voluntary societies provided limited maintenance and medical services, by 1950 only one special school for pupils with intellectual disabilities had been given official recognition. Indeed, it was to take until the 1960s before educational services for children in this category were to grow substantially. During the 1960s and early 1970s, special schools were the preferred form of educational provision. By the time of writing of the SERC Report, there had been a significant expansion of special classes in ordinary schools. At that time, about 0.9% of all primary and post-primary pupils were receiving their education in special schools. The most recent report on special education The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes (NCSE, 2011) indicates that approximately 6,340 children attend 118 special schools, and approximately 3,000 pupils attend special classes. A further 16,600 children with low incidence disabilities attend primary schools and receive support from resource teachers. It is not possible at present to quantify the number of children with high incidence special needs or learning support needs being supported by the General Allocation Model.

Currently, educational provision for pupils with special educational needs is made in both mainstream and special schools. Special schools were initially established to cater for children with particular special needs, but have evolved over time to cater for children with multiple disabilities or with complex needs. Centres providing an applied behavioural analysis (ABA) specific methodology on a pilot basis for pupils with autism, have now become special schools for children with autism, providing a holistic education using autism-specific methodologies. Provision within mainstream schools can include special classes (for example, special classes for children with autism or for pupils with specific speech and languages disorder). It also includes the allocation of additional teaching resources to help the school make suitable provision for pupils who are eligible for learning-support teaching, pupils with learning difficulties or pupils who

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*Literacy in a Changing World*
have special educational needs arising from high incidence disabilities (borderline-mild general learning disability and specific learning disability) or low incidence disabilities. Each school decides how the resources for high incidence support are used and how they are divided among the students who need such support. The additional teaching may be provided in the classroom or in small separate groups or in a combination of both. Some pupils may need additional one-to-one teaching for a specified period. Schools with pupils with SEN of a low incidence nature are allocated a specific number of hours of resource teaching in line with the relevant category of SEN. Circular Sp Ed 02 05 (p.16) sets out the various categories of low incidence disabilities and the level of resource teaching support available to schools in respect of each category.

Learning support/resource teachers are appointed to provide support under the general allocation arrangements. Resource teachers usually provide individual support to pupils with low incidence disabilities, although in response to the particular needs of the child, this support may also be given in a group situation or through in-class support. Referring back to Circular 24/03, DES Circular 0037/2011 reminds us of the flexibility of approach that is available in terms of utilisation of resource teaching hours at local level.

Circular 24/03 further provides that, although resource teaching allocations have been sanctioned on the basis of individual applications, the overriding principle is that the resources be deployed in the manner that best meets the needs of pupils with special needs in the school. This can be achieved by supporting pupils in the mainstream classroom or teaching in small groups. The purpose of the allocation is not necessarily to provide 1:1 individual teaching support (Circular 24/03, p.3).

It is also best practice for the class teacher to differentiate the curriculum provision so that the needs of the child with SEN will be optimally addressed. This is underlined by the DES in ‘Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support – Guidelines for Teachers’ (2007) where it ‘recognises that the central role of the class teacher in identifying and planning for the needs of all pupils is essential to the effective inclusion of pupils with special educational needs’ (p.1). We are reminded of this point in DES Circular 0037/2011 which refers back to Circular SP.ED 08/02, ‘which provides that the post of Resource Teacher is an additional post allocated to assist a school or cluster of schools in providing an education which meets the needs of children assessed on the basis of individual need as having special educational needs arising from disability. Meeting the needs of such children is a whole school effort and not the responsibility of resource teachers alone because these children are fully integrated into a mainstream school and will spend most of his/her time with a mainstream teacher.’

The Department of Education and Science has issued a circular, Sp Ed 02/05 which sets out in detail how teaching resources for children who need additional support in mainstream primary schools are organised. This has been supplemented by Circular 0036/2006 and Circular 0034/2007. These circulars, and more recent circulars regarding administrative arrangements for the appointment of teachers to support pupils with resource and learning support needs, can be accessed via the website www.education.ie.

The development of inclusive school environments for pupils with special educational needs has received significant attention in recent years. The DES document ‘Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support – Guidelines for Teachers’ (2007) emphasises that ‘all children are unique and special educational needs can occur on continuum from mild to severe and from transitory to enduring’ (p.1). These Guidelines draw attention to the fact that individual special educational needs may occur anywhere.
along a continuum and that, accordingly, the level of intervention and support provided in school should be matched to those needs and their changing nature over time. It is worth noting that these Guidelines are intended to complement the Learning Support Guidelines (2000) and to be used in conjunction with the ‘Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process’ (NCSE, 2006).

**SEN and Literacy Challenges**

**Overview**

The DES policy on literacy and numeracy, ‘Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life’ (2011), gives particular mention to the literacy needs of pupils with special educational needs. It emphasises that ‘children with special educational needs, including children who are exceptionally able, need to be supported in different ways’ (DES, 2011, p. 65). It goes on to say that ‘these students include students with general learning disabilities, those who are deaf/hard of hearing, students with dyslexia, students with emotional and behavioural difficulties and students with other forms of disability. Students attending special schools, and, in particular, special schools for children with severe and profound learning disabilities, will experience even greater challenges in acquiring literacy and numeracy skills. While children and young people who are exceptionally able may not experience difficulties in acquiring literacy and numeracy skills, we need to adjust their educational experience to enable them to achieve their potential. The purpose of this strategy is to raise achievement in literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students, including those with special educational needs. As with all students, the learning potential of students with special educational needs should be recognised and developed as fully as possible. Assessment, differentiation and personalisation in teaching and learning are vital skills for all teachers and ECCE practitioners in all contexts but are particularly important in the case of children and students with special educational needs’ (DES, 2011, p.66).

Without the ability to read and write, opportunities for academic and occupational success are severely limited. Lerner and Johns (2009) point out that over 80% of children with learning disabilities and related mild disabilities encounter difficulties in reading. It is critical to identify children with literacy problems early on and to provide them with appropriate support and instruction. This is acknowledged in the Primary School Curriculum (1999):

> The ability to read effectively is an essential requirement if the child is to benefit fully from the educational process, to develop his/her potential, and to participate appropriately as a citizen in society. This is a crucial element in the child’s language learning ... It is important that reading, comprehension and writing skills are acquired systematically and that children with particular learning needs are identified at an early stage and provided with adequate remedial support.

**Primary School Curriculum - Language (1999, p.2)**

The ‘Learning Support Guidelines’ (2000, p.9) also specifically emphasise and provide guidance on the provision of early intervention and learning-support programmes.

Literacy can present challenges for many children with SEN, and those difficulties can vary in severity and range. Pupils with dyslexia, for example, may find they have difficulty with short term memory, reading comprehension, spelling and sequencing. Children with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may find it hard to concentrate on reading for any length of time and to make a sustained effort at written tasks. Those with dyspraxia may have limited concentration, find it hard to understand
some concepts in language and be reluctant to read aloud because of articulation
difficulties. For many, reading may be seen as a threatening and not very enjoyable
experience.

However, while there may be commonalities of strengths and challenges for children
with specific special educational needs, it is important to be aware of the individual
learning profile of each individual child and to be aware of each child’s unique
characteristics when planning for and supporting that child’s learning. Westwood
presents this as a guiding principle for teachers of children with SEN:

The student with disability in your class is first and foremost another student – just like all
the others in your class. As far as possible, treat him or her in exactly the same way that you
treat all other students. He or she has the same basic need for your friendship, respect,
assistance, stimulation and good quality teaching as every other student in your class.
(Westwood, 2003, p.19)

Westwood underlines this point further by citing Smith (2001):

Students with a particular disability (e.g. Down Syndrome) as a group are just as diverse in
their personal characteristics, behaviour, interests, and learning aptitudes as any other group
of students. The assumption that they are all the same is a main cause of negative
stereotyping of particular disability groups.

(Smith, 2001 – cited by Westwood, 2003, p.19)

In a review of the research literature on teaching approaches designed to help pupils
with special educational needs acquire literacy skills (commissioned by the DfEE, 2000)
it was also noted that there is evidence that pupils with similar objective assessment of a
particular difficulty will respond to classroom tasks differently and will have different
degrees of difficulty in acquiring literacy skills. The following extract from the DfEE
review is also worthy of note:

There is no cogent evidence that, as a broad group, pupils with special educational needs
which interfere with literacy acquisition require teaching approaches that are qualitatively or
significantly different from those used for all pupils. However, there is evidence that pupils’
effective learning in literacy depends on appropriate differentiation which will, in itself,
often mean that the actual structure of the literacy teaching either has to be more explicit or
composed/balanced differently. There is evidence that there is no single approach or method
which will be effective for all pupils within one category of special educational needs.

(DfEE, 2000, p.1)

The website of the Special Education Support Service (SESS) www.sess.ie outlines how
differing categories of special educational needs impact on teaching and learning, and
offers tips for teaching, along with additional resources and references. It emphasises
that the following:

categorising the complex and diverse nature of disability in this form is not intended to
equate individuals with disability labels. Rather, these categories act as signposts that enable
teachers to negotiate the social, psychological and biological factors that affect each
individual pupil’s learning and unique needs. The strategies outlined are not exclusive to
any category, or indeed to special educational needs, and should be used in conjunction with
a number of key publications.

(www.sess.ie)
It also stresses that each student with, for example, Down Syndrome, should be treated as an individual whose education is based on an assessment of his/her strengths and needs. It is while bearing in mind the importance of taking cognisance of the individual child and his or her unique needs, as underlined by the SESS quotation above, that the following potential needs of children with special educational needs and/or specific learning difficulties are considered.

It is neither appropriate nor possible to outline here key steps or strategies relating to literacy development of pupils with SEN and/or SLDs, especially when one considers the number of variables which this whole area encompasses, not least, the individual pupil (as mentioned earlier in this document). Nevertheless, it may be worthwhile to consider one key area, dyslexia, and to make reference to some resources and supports that are available to support literacy development of pupils with dyslexia. This information should not be viewed as an exhaustive list, rather a useful point of reference for persons working in the Irish context.

**Dyslexia**

In light of the fact that dyslexia is seen to be a relatively commonly-occurring specific learning disability (SLD) that affects the learning process in relation to literacy in a significant way, it is appropriate to give it due consideration here.

The Report of the Task Force on Dyslexia (2001) proposed a broad conceptualisation of dyslexia that recognises the continuum of learning difficulties arising from dyslexia that students may experience, while also taking into account recent research findings on the aetiology of dyslexia:

Dyslexia is manifested in a continuum of specific learning difficulties related to the acquisition of basic skills in reading, spelling and/or writing, such difficulties being unexpected in relation to an individual's other abilities and educational experiences. Dyslexia can be described at the neurological, cognitive and behavioural levels. It is typically characterised by inefficient information processing, including difficulties in phonological processing, working memory, rapid naming and automaticity of basic skills. Difficulties in organisation, sequencing, and motor skills may also be present.


The Task Force considered that, in light of the individual manifestations of dyslexia being so diverse and the range of need being so varied, learning difficulties arising from dyslexia should be viewed along a continuum rather than falling into clearly definable categories. The Task Force recommended the adoption of a model of provision based on meeting the needs of each student along the continuum of learning difficulties arising from dyslexia. While acknowledging this diversity of manifestation and need, it is nevertheless useful to consider some of the more frequently-occurring difficulties with literacy that dyslexia presents. The Special Education Support Service has a useful website www.sess.ie which contains much helpful information in this regard. It points out that dyslexia affects the learning process in relation to reading, writing and speaking, such difficulties being disproportionate to the student's other academic abilities. It goes on to say that 'Dyslexia may affect the development of the student's ability to remember in sequence what is seen or heard, his/her ability to identify sounds in words and his/her ability to put things in order (e.g. information, letters, stories, numbers, the days of the week, the months of the year, etc); it may affect concentration, co-ordination, letter/numeral formation skills and the speed of reading and understanding. In addition students may have problems with directions, map-reading,
recognising left and right, spelling, copying words and numbers from a book or a blackboard, recalling the names of words or objects and reading music’ (www.sess.ie).

It is clear from the points raised in the above paragraph that dyslexia can have a significant impact on the progress of an individual in the broad area of literacy. These difficulties can be heightened further when dyslexia co-exists with other special educational needs such as dyscalculia, dyspraxia or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Nevertheless, as the SESS points out, while dyslexia occurs across the lifespan, it may be alleviated with appropriate intervention. Such intervention will take into account, among other factors, the nature of the specific learning difficulties with which the individual presents.

The website of the SESS has much useful information regarding dyslexia and literacy, including information on indicators of dyslexia at various ages and practical strategies that can be employed to assist the pupil. It also lists many useful resources. (http://www.sess.ie/categories/specific-learning-disabilities/dyslexia) Many teachers also have membership of the Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA), the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE) and the Dyslexia Association of Ireland – these organisations are a useful resource to teachers who wish to access further information on supporting the literacy needs of pupils with dyslexia.

**Assessed Syndromes / Categories of SEN**

For children with significant learning difficulties, such as may be present with some assessed syndromes, the benefits of acquiring literacy skills is likely to extend beyond the attainment of a functionally useful level of skill in reading and writing. Progress in reading can develop skills such as speech and language skills, auditory perceptual skills and working memory function: these are all areas where children with Down syndrome, for example, usually display difficulties (DfEE, 2000). For children with Down syndrome the level of general learning disability will range from mild to profound. ‘Each student with Down syndrome should be treated as an individual whose education is based on an assessment of his/her strengths and needs.’ (http://www.sess.ie/categories/assessed-syndromes/down-syndrome) Some other syndromes, such as Tourette syndrome, may lead to difficulties in literacy that are related to the symptoms of the disorder themselves (such as when tics interfere with participation in class discussions or have a negative impact on handwriting and presentation of written work) and/or difficulties that are caused by co-existing symptoms such as obsessive compulsive disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (http://www.sess.ie/categories/assessed-syndromes/tourette-syndrome). For the student with Tourette syndrome, hand tics often interfere with legibility of handwriting and visual spatial deficits may lead to the student having difficulty with copying from the board or elsewhere. It is important to note that tics may also impede activities that have strict timing criteria, which may result in lowered test scores and associated inaccurate estimates of ability.

**Language**

The Revised Primary Curriculum emphasises that language learning is an integrated process in which it is ‘difficult to separate the functions of oral language, reading and writing’ (1999, p.2). It describes all three of those functions as being ‘intimately related’. Language difficulties can have a significant impact on the pupil’s attainment in a number of areas, including literacy. Expressive language difficulties may impact on the pupil’s attainment level in writing, spelling, composing sentences and general answering of questions, for example. Students with receptive language difficulties have problems
understanding oral language or in listening, and may have difficulties processing and
retaining auditory information, and in following instructions and directions. They may
also have difficulties remembering strings of words or may find sound discrimination
quite challenging. Pupils with global language disorder experience difficulties with both
receptive and expressive language – such a disorder affects both the understanding and
use of language, with associated challenges across the literacy area.

Again, a useful resource for teachers working with pupils with language difficulties or
language disorders is the website of the Special Education Support Service
(www.sess.ie). This website offers tips for teaching and learning and also suggests
resources and reference material.

**CPD and Resources for Teachers working with Students with SEN**

Until recently, special education was given minimal attention within initial teacher
education and tended to be regarded as an optional extra. Teacher education aims to develop
reflective, knowledgeable practitioners and insights gained from the study of special
education have an important contribution to make to this process.

(Griffin and Shevlin, 2007, p.7).

The observation above by Griffin and Shevlin is noteworthy in the context of the
continuum of teacher education in general terms, but specifically with reference to the
whole area of literacy and special educational needs (SEN). It is imperative that all
primary teachers have knowledge pertaining to the teaching of literacy, and specific
knowledge related to the teaching of literacy to children with SEN. This is highlighted in
the DES Policy on literacy and numeracy, ‘Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life’
(2011), which emphasises the importance of ensuring ‘that ITE programmes for primary
teachers provide adequate time for courses and learning experiences that will develop
and assess all student teachers’ understanding and ability to apply current knowledge,
strategies and methodologies in areas including ... the teaching of children with special
and additional learning needs’ (DES, 2011, p.34).

No Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme could prepare a teacher for all
eventualities and challenges that may emerge or develop during one’s teaching career –
the importance of ongoing teacher professional development and supports for teachers
and learners in the light of new and emerging needs is therefore crucial. Various
supports exist within the Irish context – including, for example, web-based supports,
visiting teacher services, accredited and non-accredited courses of various durations,
support from official departmental agencies and from voluntary organisations, and
teacher professional bodies. It is not intended to list all of these supports here –
however, reference will be made to some resources that are widely accessible and of
particular relevance to primary teachers teaching in Ireland.

The website of the Special Education Support Service (www.sess.ie), as already
mentioned in this document, is a useful resource for teachers who are working with
children with SEN. It includes information on how differing categories of special
educational need may impact on teaching and learning and also offers tips for teaching,
along with additional resources and reference. While this information is not exclusively
related to literacy, it does provide a range of information that is directly relevant to the
literacy needs of students with SEN. The role of the Special Education Support Service
(SESS) is ‘to enhance the quality of learning and teaching in relation to special
educational provision’ (www.sess.ie). The service co-ordinates, develops and delivers a
range of professional development initiatives and support structures for school
personnel working with students with special educational needs – the service extends to mainstream primary and post-primary schools, special schools and special classes. The SESS operates under the remit of the Teacher Education Section (TES) of the Department of Education and Skills.

Professional development needs with regard to SEN vary as teachers seek to respond to the teaching/learning needs of the students with whom they work. The SESS aims to provide support to schools and individual teachers ‘in as flexible a way as possible’. For example, support might be financial, advisory or facilitative in nature. The types of support provided are as follows:

- In-School Support (e.g. telephone advice, a school visit from a member of the team, or an in-service course for the staff);
- Individual Professional Development (e.g. access to a course that is specific to their professional development needs and to the needs of their students and school);
- Group Professional Development Initiatives (professional development activity, relating to a specific area of interest in SEN – for whole school, group of teachers or professional organisation);
- Telephone Helpline and E-mail Support.

The website itself is a useful first ‘port of call’ – the sections therein give information that is particularly relevant for the teacher in the Irish school context.

The National Educational Psychologist Service (NEPS) provides assistance and support to schools in a variety of ways, including in terms of the identification and addressing of literacy needs of children with learning difficulties/SEN. This support may take various forms, including, for example, assessment of a given student’s educational profile and needs. This service has also produced a number of publications that provide guidance that relates directly and/or indirectly to the literacy needs of students with SEN. Such publications include Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties - A Continuum of Support: Guidelines for Teachers (NEPS, 2010) and A Continuum of Support (NEPS, 2007), A Continuum of Support for Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Teachers (NEPS, 2010), A Continuum of Support for Post-Primary Schools: Resource Pack for Teachers (NEPS, 2010), Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post Primary Guidelines (DES, 2007).

Other official publications which are useful to schools in addressing the literacy and other needs of children with SEN and/or children with specific learning difficulties in the area of literacy include the following: Circular SP ED 02/05 (DES, 2005), Learning Support Guidelines (DES, 2000).

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE), established under the EPSEN Act 2004 is another official agency that has a particular remit with regard to SEN. The NCSE was set up to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities with particular emphasis on children. Their local service is delivered through a national network of Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) who interact with parents and schools and liaise with the HSE in providing resources to support children with special educational needs. Obtaining resource hours for children with SEN is via application to the SENO and funding for extra supports such as assistive technology is also applied for via the SENO. Such resource hours and, in some cases, assistive technology, may be of paramount importance in enabling the pupil to realise his/her potential in the area of literacy.
A variety of accredited and non-accredited courses are available to teachers in the area of special educational needs – the literacy needs of children with SEN typically receive particular focus in these courses. Such courses include postgraduate diploma courses, some of which currently carry a DES allowance for teachers who satisfactorily complete same and fulfil specified conditions.

**Concluding Comment**

This chapter has considered the challenges of developing literacy skills with children with special educational needs. An overview is given of the special education context in Ireland, outlining developments in support including the publication of the Special Education Review Committee Report (1993) and the publication of various Departmental Circulars. The particular challenges associated with Dyslexia, Assessed Syndromes and Language difficulties are briefly discussed. The chapter concludes with a description of the professional development supports available to teachers in the area of special education.
Results of an INTO Questionnaire on Literacy 2011

Introduction

The Education Committee circulated a questionnaire on literacy to a random sample of INTO members in order to ascertain the views of teachers concerning literacy and to obtain a snapshot of current practices in place in schools in relation to literacy. A total of 1,000 questionnaires were distributed to randomly-selected teachers from the INTO data-base early in 2011. The response rate was 34%. A summary of the results based on an analysis of the questionnaire is outlined in this chapter.

Teacher Profile

As could be expected, 89% of the respondents were female. In relation to years of teaching experience, almost half of the respondents had less than 10 years teaching experience while about 15% were teaching for between 10 - 20 years. Just less than a quarter of the replies were from teachers with 21 – 30 years of experience and the careers of the remaining 11% spanned more than 31 years.

School Profile

There was a relatively even spread of teachers in schools with fewer than 100 pupils (23%), schools with 100-200 pupils (22%) and schools with 200-300 pupils (22%). Large schools – those with 300 – 400 pupils – accounted for 13% of respondents and 17% of respondents taught in school with over 400 pupils.

Approximately 60% of the teachers taught in schools with fewer than 15 teachers; with 30% coming from schools with 16 – 25 teachers on staff. Slightly more than 10% had 26 or more teaching colleagues. The majority of teachers worked in mixed schools (72.2%) with almost equal numbers teaching in all-boys’ schools, all-girls’ schools or junior mixed/senior girls’ schools.

Altogether, 30% of respondents were from DEIS schools. Very few of those who indicated that they were teaching in DEIS schools specified whether their schools were DEIS Band One , DEIS Band Two or Rural DEIS. A small number of teachers (6.5%) taught through the medium of Irish.

Class Details

The majority of the teachers who participated in the survey were class teachers teaching single grade classes. A total of 96 teachers worked with multi-grade classes, 18 of whom had more than 2 grades. The remaining 18 teachers were involved in support or special
classes, and one respondent was HSCL coordinator. In all, 27% of respondents taught Infant classes.

**Classroom Practice**

Approximately one-third of the respondents indicated that members of the middle management team in schools held posts with curricular responsibility. Approximately one-third held such posts of responsibility - English (34%), Maths (34%) and Irish (32%).

A significant majority (86%) of teachers surveyed allocated discrete time to the teaching of oral language. A closer examination of this finding indicates that 39% of respondents allocated up to 30 minutes; 30% used up to an hour, while 10% used more than an hour for oral language teaching. Slightly more infant teachers (91%) allocated discrete time to teaching oral language than teachers of other classes.

Paired reading was popular in the respondents’ classroom – more than 71% used this methodology. However, involving parents in reading/literacy/numeracy activities in the classroom proved less popular with only 20% of respondents indicating that they involved parents in such activities. One-quarter of respondents, (26%) participated in the Write-a-Book Competition.

The survey indicated that there was widespread use of a novel in the teaching of literacy with 59% of the teachers indicating that they used the novel in their own teaching, and a further 27% indicating that the novel was used in their school.

The vast majority of teachers (90%) agreed that discretionary time should be retained. Most respondents considered that at least 2 hours of discretionary time would be appropriate to their class level.

**Assessment**

The majority of teachers used Assessment for Learning (AFL) in English, Maths and Irish at least sometimes. In the case of maths, 64% of respondents always used AFL. In the case of Irish AFL was rarely or never used by 21% of respondents. See table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Literacy</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Literacy</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of teachers also stated that they assessed the learning of their pupils at the end of a topic.

Standardised testing in English reading took place in almost all classes (85%) with the majority of testing taking place in May. Standardised spelling tests were administered less frequently, by 50% of teachers. In relation to Maths, 79% of respondents indicated that they administered standardised tests and most often in May or June. Standardised tests of Irish were administered least frequently by only 9% of respondents. Teachers
reported the results of these tests to parents orally (29.7%) and in written form (22.9%), and sometimes both (22.4%). A minority of respondents (11%) stated that that they did not report the results of standardised tests to parents at all\(^6\). Overall, the results of tests were reported in a wide variety of forms and sometimes in more than one form. See table below:

**Table 2: Format of Reporting Results to Parents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Score</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STEN</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Score</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentile</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptors</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of respondents (76%) stated that the results of standardised tests were discussed at staff meetings and were analysed at whole school level. Half the respondents (50%) stated that the results were plotted and compared to the normal bell curve. Less than half the teachers (41%) surveyed had a 3-5 year plan to monitor standardised test results with a view to improving scores. Three quarters of respondents (74%) stated that the results of standardised tests were used to inform planning for teaching. The test results assisted teachers with differentiation, grouping and identifying individual needs, particularly when tests were administered in the autumn. They also helped in prioritising curricular areas for particular attention or for selecting children who may have required learning support. They provided information to a teacher at the start of the year and many teachers reported that standardised test results helped to identify aspects of the curriculum where children were experiencing difficulty or where there were gaps in children’s learning.

More than half of the respondents indicated that they encouraged their students to be involved in the evaluation of their own work. When asked to list some of the methods of self-evaluation used, popular methods such as ‘Two Stars and a Wish’, ‘Traffic Lights’, ‘Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down’, ‘KWL’ and ‘Smiley Faces’ were listed as being used by pupils to indicate satisfaction with their work and areas that might be improved. Concept mapping, drafts, proof-reading, editing and rewriting were often used to refine the writing process. Some teachers identified learning targets and helped pupils create criteria-based checklists. It was noted that pupils were encouraged to compare current and past work for comparison, then to select their ‘best work’ to keep in a portfolio.

Self-assessment in maths involved a different range of techniques. More emphasis was placed on ‘Estimate, Check and Correct’. Speed drills were also used where the children compared their results from daily/weekly tests of tables, or mental maths quizzes and evaluated their progress. Work cards which have accompanying answer cards were often used for high achievers or quick finishers. ICT was also used to encourage children to compete against themselves and note improvement. In addition, children were also encouraged to correct each other’s work sometimes using calculators.

A significant number of teachers kept samples of their pupils’ work or portfolios, with samples of English work most frequently kept (70%), maths (59%) and Irish (42%).

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\(^6\) This survey took place prior to the issuing of Circular 56/2011
In general, teachers shared the knowledge they gained from both standardised and non-standardised tests with the next teacher when handing over their class. A majority of teachers also involved students in discussion about their progress in English Literacy and Maths while considerably fewer discussed the results of Irish literacy tests, as indicated in the table below.

Table 3: Areas of progress discussed with pupils

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Literacy</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Literacy</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A variety of practices existed regarding the storage of test results. In some cases the full test booklet was retained while sometimes only the cover of the booklet with the scores was kept. The majority of teachers kept tests results for one year after the test but there were many examples of the scores being held on record until children reached between 15 and 21 years. In some schools only ‘unexpected scores’ were recorded while in others only the resource teacher kept the booklets and then only for children with IEPs. Screening by class teacher or the Learning Support / Resource Teacher (LSRT) took place in most infant classes.

Materials/Resources

The National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy acknowledged the relationship between literacy levels and the availability of reading material. The vast majority of teachers surveyed (96%) had a class library; 41% of schools had a school library and 77% of the respondents’ classes had access to and/or visit their local library.

A surprisingly large number of teachers continued to use workbooks as a teaching resource. Four out of five respondents indicated that they used workbooks for English (81%) and maths (82%). Workbooks were less frequently used in Irish. See table below:

Table 4: Subjects in which workbooks were used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Literacy</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Literacy</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>28 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ICT formed an integral part of teaching with 80% of teachers considering it a useful or very useful tool. ICT was used on a daily or weekly basis as an integral part of their teaching, by a majority of respondents, as indicated in the table below.

Table 5: Frequency of use of ICT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Use</th>
<th>Daily</th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>Monthly</th>
<th>Less often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Literacy</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Literacy</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Homework

Homework was seen as ‘Valuable’ or ‘Very valuable’ for pupils’ learning by the majority of teachers (83%). In addition, teachers expected children to spend up to 30 minutes on English and Irish literacy and maths. Only 1% of respondents set homework for weekends.

Table 6: Amount of time teachers expected to be spent on homework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of time to be spent on Homework</th>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
<th>IRISH</th>
<th>MATHS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 5 minutes</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 – 10 minutes</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 – 15 minutes</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 – 20 minutes</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 – 30 minutes</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of teachers expected their pupils to engage in both reading and writing activities in English Literacy for their homework, while a minority expected only oral work such as reading, discussion or brainstorming to prepare for future lessons. Maths homework was generally based on reinforcing class work by doing follow-up written activities; there was also widespread emphasis on learning ‘tables’ or the memorisation of number facts. Problem-solving, advocated as an important aspect of learning maths, formed a small part of maths assignments for home. With regard to homework in Irish literacy, it emerged that spelling, reading and the practice/reinforcement of new vocabulary made up most of the assigned work.

Learning Support/Resources

It emerged that 95% of teachers who responded to the question on learning support stated that they had pupils in their classes who received support from the Learning Support / Resource / EAL team. Of those that responded, 90% stated that pupils were withdrawn in small groups and 50% stated that they had in-class support. Although the Learning Support Guidelines advocated support for children who were achieving under the 12th percentile, the teachers surveyed indicated that a large number of children in their classes with higher percentile scores than that availed of learning support – 42% and 40% of pupils receiving learning support in reading and maths respectively scored higher than the 12th percentile. See table below.

Table 7: Percentile Scores of Pupils receiving Learning Support (LS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentile at which children receive LS</th>
<th>ENGLISH READING</th>
<th>MATHS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≤ 10th percentile</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-12th percentile</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 - 15</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 -30</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30+</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, some teachers also reported that not all children entitled to learning support availed of it. For example, 9% of respondents stated that children entitled to learning support in English did not avail of it and 14% of respondents indicated that children entitled to learning support in maths did not avail of it. While the Learning Support
Guidelines also advised that children should not remain indefinitely in learning support, 93% of teachers reported that there was no maximum number of years for children to avail of support.

**Continuing Professional Development**

The recent literacy and numeracy strategy placed great emphasis on the importance of CPD for teachers in raising national standards in reading and maths. Respondents were asked about their involvement in professional development during the previous 3 years and how they rated their experiences. In the first instance, it should be noted that primary teachers have a strong tradition of undertaking voluntary CPD in large numbers every year. Fewer respondents engaged in CPD concerning Irish in comparison to English and mathematics. The table below illustrates the types of CPD in which respondents engaged relating to English literacy, Irish literacy and maths within the previous three years, and how positively they rated their experience.

Table 8: Engagement in CPD by Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of CPD</th>
<th>ENG LIT. No of teachers</th>
<th>RATING Positive/Very Positive</th>
<th>IRISH LIT. No of teachers</th>
<th>RATING Positive/Very Positive</th>
<th>MATHS No of teachers</th>
<th>RATING Positive/Very Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Courses in local Ed. Centre</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer Courses</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with Cuiditheoir in own classroom</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional debate with colleagues in school</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate with other teachers at seminars/conferences</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading professional articles</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Grad studies</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-line courses</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL NUMBER OF TEACHERS</td>
<td>340</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The greatest number of teachers participated in professional development in English literacy and rated their satisfaction highly. While all forms of professional development gave rise to a high percentage of ‘positive’ or ‘very positive’ responses, those teachers who undertook post-graduate studies rated their experience as particularly worthwhile, and this was followed, interestingly, by professional debate with colleagues in school. This type of collegial interaction with colleagues either at staff/planning meetings provided the widest forum for staff development and strongly supports the idea of learning communities in schools. Teachers were also asked to indicate in what areas they would welcome additional CPD by ticking a prepared list of topics and subjects. See table opposite page.
Table 9: Suggested areas for CPD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics for future CPD</th>
<th>All teachers</th>
<th>Infant Teachers</th>
<th>Teachers in DEIS Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral Language – English</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral language – Irish</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Difficulties in English</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching children with difficulties in maths</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching higher order skills</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging High achievers</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonological awareness</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching emergent readers in English</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching emergent readers in Irish</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension strategies</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing approaches</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Included under the classification ‘OTHER’ were the topics of assessment, classroom management, learning support in the classroom, differentiation, spelling, EAL support for class teachers, ICT, different writing genres, problem solving, social skills, SESE, multi-grade teaching and development of a variety of maths skills. The need for CPD other than that which was listed was highest among the teachers in DEIS schools. While only a small number answered this question, the percentage that noted ‘other’ was 30%. This may indicate the extent to which teachers in DEIS schools require additional CPD.

Enhancing Literacy and Numeracy Achievement

Teachers surveyed were invited to suggest changes in their school or in the wider system which would enhance literacy and numeracy. The majority of respondents identified an overcrowded curriculum as problematic. There was a general call for a skills-based curriculum that was both challenging and relevant, more group work and peer tutoring to encourage independence, less quantity and more quality, focussed programmes for all schools, an emphasis on self-expression and different genres of reading and writing and increased use of IT.

Respondents also referred to the important role played by early screening and intervention in the development of literacy and numeracy. Respondents recommended increased in-class support, a more targeted approach in Infant classes with perhaps the addition of classroom assistants, an extension rather than a decrease in support for EAL children and additional places in reading schools.

The allocation of more time for literacy and numeracy instruction also featured strongly with some respondents mooting the removal of some subjects from the curriculum altogether. Some suggested that it should be mandatory to spent extra time at literacy and maths especially in multi-grade classes.

Class size was repeatedly mentioned as the main reason for poor literacy and numeracy skills. There was one suggestion that more movement of teachers through the school would give teachers a better picture of the ‘total’ curriculum. Teachers moving from mainstream to LSRT and back again would also provide a wider skill basis for teachers.
In addition, improved school planning, relevant CPD at staff meetings and a return of school development planning was mentioned by many.

Finally, it was interesting to note that many teachers commented that there were distinct signs of improvement in their schools in the area of Literacy and Numeracy. There was a view that programmes such as Jolly Phonics, Reading and Maths Recovery and First Steps were having a positive effect on literacy and numeracy levels in their schools. Parental involvement was also seen as vital and it was strongly recommended that parents be encouraged and made aware of the importance of their role in the education of their children.
Literacy in Northern Ireland

Overview

With a population of 1.7 million, (21% under 16). Northern Ireland’s education system has undergone an intense period of review, with the aim of providing a framework to meet the changing needs of the pupils, society and economy. In reality the system has been subjected to a barrage of changes that has been adopted with fervour and speed. Teachers in Northern Ireland work in an environment where excessive planning, target-setting, monitoring and evaluating are part of their daily routine. All of this is interlinked with numerous new initiatives, changes of strategies, InCAs (a diagnostic, computer-adaptive assessment tool for schools) and the ongoing new assessment procedures that are being handed down to teachers with alarming regularity. These developments have led to teachers being worn down and demoralised!

In order to understand developments in literacy in the Northern Ireland context, it is worth noting the following:

• the key structures of the Northern Ireland system;
• how the school system is distinctive from the rest of the UK;
• the different strategies and initiatives undertaken since the late 1990s; and
• the current position.

The Key structures of the NI Education system

The structure of the education system is complex, with 10 statutory bodies involved in the management and administration of the system, including the bodies that have a direct link to the implementation of literacy:

• The Department of Education (DE);
• The five Education and Library Boards (ELB) which cover different geographical areas;
• The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)
• The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
• The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
• Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (the Council for Irish-medium schools)
School Types

Until 1989, NI had only two basic categories of school - controlled schools (managed by ELB for the area) and voluntary schools (owned and managed by trustees, normally the local churches). The majority of the voluntary maintained schools are controlled by the Catholic Church. The 1998 Order introduced a new category of school, the integrated schools, whose prime focus is to provide a religiously mixed environment.

Northern Ireland’s school system is distinctive from the rest of the UK in a number of ways. Firstly there is the religion divide, as mentioned above. Secondly, students in NI sit a transfer test (the 11+) which is used to determine which children will attend grammar schools. The system of regulated tests was abolished in 2008 but the practice of deregulated tests is still in place and is a major source of debate.

In NI the school starting age is four, compared to five in England and Wales. Nursery provision is offered to three-year-olds.

Irish medium schools are peculiar to NI. In these schools, children are taught through Irish in more than half of the compulsory subjects.

The revised primary curriculum and different literacy strategies and initiatives undertaken since the late 1990s

The Revised Curriculum

The limited success of the DE’s 1998 strategy for the promotion of literacy and numeracy in schools to bring about a substantial improvement in literacy and numeracy standards across all abilities was the subject of considerable criticism by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO). This criticism was linked with the fact that there were proposed changes afoot to the Northern Ireland Curriculum. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) began the process of redesigning the curriculum based on up-to-date research on learning and the need to keep up with the changing society that is increasingly more advanced in technology. Many of the Accelerated Learning techniques by Alistair Smith (1996) put an emphasis on connecting the children’s learning. Using the evidence of increased knowledge of how children learn, there was a shift from content and the end product to a focus on acquisition of skills and the process of learning them. A new curriculum was needed to move away from content to skills, where teachers would shift their emphasis from teaching to providing learning opportunities. Bowring-Carr and West-Burnham (1997, p. 152) summarise as follows:

A school must become a place in which everyone learns how to learn, and in which each person is helped to be the initiator in his/her own learning.

As part of the research for this new curriculum an Early Years Enriched Curriculum Pilot Study was established across the five education and library boards, to examine the acquisition of skills and readiness of children for formal school work at Year 1. The rationale for the introduction of the project was based on the evidence of the difficulties that many of the children had coping with the traditional literacy-based curriculum. This was compounded by the fact that children in NI start school at four and formal work would be expected of these young children within weeks of starting school.
Observations from the pilot project found that young children whose birthdays fell in May and June fared particularly badly under the traditional system. This lack of maturity, especially in boys, appeared to result in low achievement and low self-esteem. Ultimately the system failed these children. According to the Literacy Trust as reported in The Times (23/6/99) research undertaken internationally had shown that the greater the delay in formal education the more successful children were at acquiring the necessary skills for deep learning. For example, Scandinavian children start school at the age of seven and still appear in the top 10 countries for reading standards. Katz (1988) stated that learning was about more than acquiring skills and knowledge but involved feelings and attitudes or what Katz calls ‘dispositions’. These dispositions can be defined as habits of the mind. Children who encounter formal learning at too young an age may learn skills and knowledge but their dispositions to be learners and reflective thinkers may be damaged. Furthermore, it has been suggested that children exposed to formal learning at too young an age will become less independent thinkers and become too reliant on adults. Consequently they may well lose interest in what they are doing and not become deeply involved in it.

In 2000, the psychology department of Queen’s University, Belfast, evaluated the pilot project and found that the children’s oral skills and expressive writing were more fully developed.

In 2004, the Education Minister gave approval for the revised curriculum at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 to be implemented in 2007 on a three-year rolling programme. The new curriculum was now placing a greater emphasis on developing children’s skills, capabilities and the capacity to learn for themselves. There was a strong focus on pupils’ personal development. The primary phase comprises the following stages:

**Foundation stage:**  
Year 1 (ages 4-5)  
Year 2 (ages 5-6)

**Key stage 1:**  
Year 3 (ages 6-7)  
Year 4 (ages 7-8)

**Key stage 2:**  
Year 5 (ages 8-9)  
Year 6 (ages 9-10)  
Year 7 (ages 10-11)

The curriculum is set out in six different areas and teachers are encouraged, where appropriate, to integrate learning across the six different areas to make connections for children.

**Every School a Good School Strategy**

Every School a Good School is a strategy for raising achievement in literacy and numeracy and it is aimed at tackling underachievement in literacy and numeracy. Caitriona Ruane, the then Minister for Education, acknowledged that the previous initiatives did not succeed sufficiently in bringing a sufficient level of improvement in standards of attainments in literacy. A gap remained between the highest and the lowest achieving pupils. The Minister wanted improvements, especially for lower-attaining pupils in high social and economic disadvantaged areas.

The backdrop to this strategy was compounded by a system that was, according to many, deeply inequitable i.e. the infamous 11+ test that pupils sat at the end of Year 7. According to the Every School a Good School Strategy, the revised curriculum
provides a unique opportunity for the learning and teaching of literacy in primary schools to take place in a way and at a pace that suits the needs of individual children. This cannot sit alongside a system that tests and separates children at the age of ten or eleven, opening up opportunities for some but closing them down for too many others.

(DE, 2009)

The strategy continued to defend its new policy by citing research produced by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). It argued that education systems should ‘limit early tracking and streaming and postpone academic selection … Academic Selection needs to be used with caution since it poses risks to equity’ (DE, 2009). Therefore, a strategy was also put in place to end academic selection.

This new strategy recognised the limitations and failures of the 1998 Strategy for the Promotion of Literacy and Numeracy:

• It identified clearly and appropriately the need in every school for well-defined literacy and numeracy policies and highlighted the importance of early intervention.
• It also advocated the need for a more systemic use of data, and use of diagnostic testing to influence future teaching approaches and remediation strategies.

The strategy led to some improvements, notably by higher-attaining pupils. However, it did not impact sufficiently to raise the overall attainment standards in literacy and numeracy, particularly for the underachieving pupils.

The limited success of the 1989 programme to bring about substantial improvement in literacy and numeracy across the ability groups was the subject of considerable criticism by the NIAO (Northern Ireland Audit Office) and concluded that ‘Improving standards in Literacy and Numeracy remains a major challenge for schools’.

However, improvements were made subsequently. The Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) revealed that the 2003 results in Literacy were above average. However, in 2006, levels were at OECD average. While the results were noteworthy, there were still 5000 children entering post-primary with literacy skills below the level expected. There was, according to the strategy, research confirming the correlation between social disadvantage and educational performance.

The aim of this new strategy was to raise standards in literacy through learning and teaching strategies designed to help young people acquire and develop core literacy skills. It also aimed to narrow the gap in relation to outcomes achieved by boys compared to girls and between those most and least disadvantaged. It also placed a greater emphasis on narrowing the gap between the highest performing pupils. For these aims to be achieved, focus was now placed on the following:

• Quality whole-class teaching set in the context of a rich language curriculum, promoting all four interdependent strands of language – listening, reading, writing and speaking. Children would have opportunities in modelled, shared, guided and independent work;
• Continued work on a linguistic phonic programme designed to complement the revised curriculum;
• Additional support for identified pupils and IEPs;
• Improving monitoring, evaluation and the use of data.
More attention was now deemed necessary to be given to data reflecting whole school outcomes. The use of bench-marking was to be used more systematically by principals and senior management. Effective remedial action was then to be taken.

More careful consideration was to be given to standardised scores as inspection reports revealed that there were continuing problems with the use of performance data across schools. Approaches to standardised testing were inconsistent; the dissemination of standardised scores and related data to teachers was often not well managed; the understanding of standardised and other data was limited, and teachers were often uncertain how best to use performance data to help them determine the effectiveness of their teaching and to adjust, as necessary their future planning and practice.

Proper self-evaluation leading to effective school development planning was at the centre of the department's new policy and they were of the view that data lay at the heart of both of these.

The Department provided access to software to support statutory assessment requirements in literacy and numeracy. The InCAS was to be used for pupils in years 4-7. Schools were now under a statutory requirement to set targets for literacy achievement in key stage assessments.

It was proposed that the new advisory board ESA (which has still not come into being) would meet regularly with the principals and the board of governors to discuss performance and provide support in the school planning process.

A target was set that 95% of students would gain GCSE A*-G in English by 2020. Work was under way on an assessment policy to be delivered for both primary and secondary levels.

In conclusion, this strategy was the beginning of a new culture where the department was promoting self-evaluation, targets, data and teacher accountability.

**Count, Read: Succeed - the new Literacy and Numeracy Strategy**

In the spring of 2011 yet another new strategy was launched for improving outcomes in literacy and numeracy. *Count, read: succeed* set out a renewed focus on literacy and numeracy and a systematic approach to supporting teachers in their central role in raising standards. According to the strategy, ‘International evidence indicates that the NI education system has room to improve’. Referring to Northern Ireland, PISA stated the following:

> The performance of our 15 year olds in reading and maths is not significantly different from the OECD average ........however our performance lags behind that of the highest performing systems and, compared to them we continue to have a persistent body of underachievement.

*(OECD, 2010)*

Other than the PISA data, the department does not have information that allows it to make international comparisons of children's performances at the primary phase. To address this gap Northern Ireland decided to take part in two international studies that assess the performance of 9-10 year olds in literacy and numeracy, PIRLS and TIMSS. These tests provide data in reading as well as in maths and in science. This information will then be used to identify areas for improvement.
Like the two previous strategies, Count, Read: Succeed aims to ensure that every child, irrespective of his or her background, race, gender or religion, leaves school with the skills he or she needs in literacy and numeracy. There are six key elements to this strategy:

1. Assessment arrangements are given major priority, complementing the curriculum and attaching priority to progression;
2. The central role of teachers in raising pupil attainment is acknowledged;
3. Early intervention is used to address underachievement;
4. Parents, families and communities are engaged in the strategy;
5. Best practice is identified and shared.

The department’s targets are challenging. By 2020, 90% of children are expected to achieve a level 4 at the end of key stage two.

**The Role of Assessment**

According to the strategy,

‘Assessment provides information that has a key role in helping schools improve outcomes. Knowing how pupils are performing allows the school to undertake informed self-evaluation and set meaningful and challenging targets in the School Development Plan.’

The InCAs diagnostic assessment tool is viewed as a data tool to help inform planning. The revised assessment arrangements are now been rolled out and the levels of progression are being revamped.

**The Role of the Teacher**

Count, read: succeed supports teachers as reflective professionals. The strategy stresses the importance of early intervention and recommends that teachers use appropriate data and professional judgement to identify underachievement as early as possible. Teachers are assured that they will be supported as they address underachievement, so that pupils can achieve to their potential. Priority is given to a high quality phonic programme and training will be given for same.

**The Role of School Leaders**

The school and the board of governors will ensure that a school’s development plan (SDP) has a focus on literacy which includes robust targets for raising standards. The priorities and targets contained in the SDP will link to planning, target setting and monitoring of progress at whole school and year group, class and individual level. The principal and coordinators will promote a culture of high expectations for every pupil, of accountability for outcomes and of sharing best practice.

**The Role of Students**

The children are expected to work hard, come to school regularly and evaluate their own progress.

**Implementation**

A key lesson from the previous literacy strategy is the importance of ensuring consistency of implementation. The department has written an action plan that extends
to the 2015 period and that will be vigorously monitored, evaluated and reported on through ETI inspections to evaluate the progress being made against the targets and action plan.

**Concluding comment**

Without doubt, the revised curriculum provides a unique opportunity for the learning and teaching of literacy in primary schools to take place in a way and at a pace that suits the needs of individual children. It has at its core a strong focus on the fundamental skills of talking and listening, reading and writing. However, the strategies that the department is imposing in relation to target setting and measurable outcomes, (and pushing in such a stringent fashion) is not offering teachers much flexibility to use their professional judgement to plan, teach and evaluate in ways that meet the needs of children in the classroom.

The current strategy could be interpreted as a deliberate attack on teachers as professionals who are working in an ever-changing environment. More than ever, teachers now work in a culture that is dominated by targets and measurable outcomes. Teachers have always used their professional judgment and assessment to identify underachievement. However, the department currently fails to present any reasonable funding or resources to support underachievement. When requests are made to the Department for additional support, the response is all too often that the pupils don’t meet the criteria for extra support. Added to this is the reality that many teachers are now working in large classes and with no assistance to give extra help to those children who are underachieving.

Furthermore the department’s removal of the Regulated Transfer Tests hasn’t remedied the situation as some schools, because of pressure from parents or to prevent pupil numbers from dropping (with the consequential loss of a teacher), are obliged to address aspects of the deregulated tests that many children take each November.

Both of the recent strategies have mentioned the importance of parent involvement in taking an active interest in their child’s education, yet the department hasn’t adopted any concrete strategy to promote this policy. More than ever we live in a society where environmental issues are impacting on pupil learning. In addressing the unacceptable gap between the highest and the lowest achieving pupils, Every School a Good School strategy failed to think creatively about how to engage pupils who are coming from backgrounds where education is not valued or where socio-economic circumstances disenfranchise them from the opportunity of getting a chance to participate fully in the education system.

The current minister for education, in a speech a couple of weeks ago, talked about the need ‘to prioritise the needs of children over institutions’. However, it is difficult for educators to believe this when the department continues to introduce ill-thought initiatives at such an inconceivable rate, that teachers are not even given time to absorb or implement these with any enthusiasm. Teachers need be supported in doing what they do best, and that is to teach.
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Appendix I

Parental Involvement

How Do I Facilitate Parents’ Role as Prime Educator to Improve Student Attainment in Literacy and Mathematics?

An Action Research Study Tackling the Educational Outcomes of Disadvantaged Students

Joni Clarke is a primary school teacher working in a DEIS 1 school on Dublin's Northside. Over the past two years she has engaged in Action Research in her own school in the hope of raising student attainment in literacy and numeracy. She currently works with the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).

Introduction

In September 2010, I began an action research study with my class of Junior Infant students and their families. The study emanated from concern regarding the poor academic achievement of students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds in Ireland when compared with their higher SES counterparts. A comprehensive and longstanding body of research (see Desforges, 2003 and Henderson & Mapp, 2002 for reviews), as well as my own practice as a teacher, corroborated the importance of parental involvement (PI) in children’s educational attainment (EA). Subsequently my research question was not ‘Does PI in children’s education facilitate EA?’ Instead I focussed on how, as a teacher, I could garner the involvement of parents categorised as low SES background and who in the past had been classified as ‘hard to reach’ within the education system. The four-part initiative outlined here, aimed to improve student EA through facilitating greater parental skills and understanding thus better enabling them to support their child’s learning. The following paper outlines the context, approach and findings of this study.

Context

The study was conducted in a school designated as disadvantaged and involved in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools Initiative (DEIS1) where twenty-five percent of students were Members of the Travelling Community. Enumeration area data from the 2006 Census indicated that approximately sixty percent of families in the local catchment area were living in social housing, sixteen percent were unemployed, and five percent had completed third level education. The area was also characterised by high levels of early school leaving and detrimental social issues including alcohol and drug abuse. It is worth noting that the Census 2006 data reflects a period in Ireland of unprecedented economic wealth.

Research illustrates that children from disadvantaged communities fail to benefit as much from the education system when compared to their higher SES counterparts. Studies also attest to the fact that children of early school leavers are most at risk of leaving school early themselves. This under achievement in school often has negative consequences for later life and contributes to an inter-generational cycle of poverty (DEIS, 2005). The issue of parents’ early school leaving, potentially had significant implications for the children in the present study. Only two of the parents had completed their Leaving Certificate, whilst four had no secondary education at all and
seven left school in their first or second year of post primary education. None of the parents had any post-secondary qualifications.

The National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading in 2009 found that SES consistently remains a factor in low or high attainment by Irish children. The assessment found most schools with no low achievers were relatively advantaged while schools with no very high achievers were relatively disadvantaged (Eivers et al, 2009). In 2007 standardised test scores in my own school reflected this trend and the proportion of children scoring below the twentieth percentile far exceeded state norms. These results highlighted chronic levels of under attainment, a finding that was not unique to my school.

My Concern

The DEIS Initiative improved EA in our school from its levels in 2007 through the introduction of new literacy and numeracy programmes which espoused more active and child-centred teaching and learning methodologies. However, in 2010 the children were still underperforming when compared to state norms. My belief was not that parents from lower SES backgrounds were uninvolved or disinterested, but rather their involvement was not advantageous to facilitating EA. It was my contention that, in some instances, children from higher SES backgrounds had experiences in the home that were more conducive to supporting EA. Corresponding to my belief, recent Irish research suggests that parents from all backgrounds are interested, concerned and involved in their child’s education (Cregan, 2008; Byrne & Smyth, 2010). Cregan (2008) states however, that social class differences emerge in terms of the levels of communication between the school and the home and also in relation to those out of school experiences that appear crucial for academic success. I realise there are numerous sociological and personal reasons why some lower SES parents are not as engaged in activities that support EA. However, the school also plays an important role regarding the extent to which it encourages and facilitates the knowledge and skills needed by parents to support their children’s learning.

‘Parental Involvement’ in the research literature relates to a wide range of activities. In the Irish context, much of this involvement is in formal representation on boards of management, on parent’s associations and in the giving and receiving of information. This type of involvement, which is commonly espoused in national policy (see Parents as Partners in Education, Circular Letter 24/91, 1991) is important for the democratisation of our schools. However, it is not the type of involvement known to facilitate EA (Epstein, 2001).

At present, I believe that the role that the school plays regarding PI is largely underutilised in most schools. The school culture, unchanging perceptions of the teachers’ and schools’ role and judgements about parents’ level of interest and ability may well contribute to this. Significantly, while SES is considered the greatest predictor of academic success and failure, PI can significantly influence children’s EA and has been found to play a greater role on EA than SES (Harris, Andrew-Power, Goodall, 2009). Therefore, it seems a logical step in the process of improving student attainment in literacy and numeracy to explore ways of enhancing parents’ knowledge and skills to effectively support their children’s learning.

The innovative Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCLS) aims to raise parents’ awareness of their own ability to enhance their child’s EA. It is to date, the Department of Education’s primary means of realising policy in the area of PI in education. The scheme only exists in schools designated as disadvantaged by the...
Department of Education and Skills; however an Economic and Social Research Institute (ERSI) survey of school leavers indicated that sixty-one percent of young people from semi/unskilled and manual backgrounds had not attended designated disadvantaged schools (Smyth & McCoy, 2009). Furthermore, assessments of the scheme indicate that it has not yielded improved EA and fails to reach the parents considered ‘most in need’ (Archer & Shortt, 2003). This rang true in my own school where high quality initiatives offered by the HSCL were being accessed by the same small group. This committed and confident group of parents seemed least in need of the supports being offered. It appeared to me that there was no effective PI programme at primary level that reached all parents or more specifically, those parents most in need of support.

Why Action Research?

Action Research is not aimed only at better understanding a problem but research aimed at changing situations (Denscombe, 2004). Freire (1972) attests that changing a reality that has become oppressive can only be achieved through praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. In this way, I saw action research as a means to reflect and act on my own practice in relation to parental involvement. I set out to address my concern by asking the question, How do I facilitate parents’ role as prime educator to improve student attainment in literacy and mathematics?

The Study

The study consisted of four actions. Each action was refined over three cycles through a cyclical process of action/reflection/action.

Action One: Building Relationships

Through a series of interviews I learned that many of my student’s parents had had particularly negative experiences of school which now informed their interactions with their child’s school. Therefore re-establishing positive relationships with the school institution, through their relationship with me, was paramount. The research literature and my own teaching experience pointed to the centrality of a trusting relationship in facilitating a partnership with parents (Pena, 2000; Mapp, 2002, Payne and Kaba, 2001). The literature also suggested that positive teacher attitudes and school culture were necessary for successful interventions to occur. Consequently building relationships with each parent was the foundation on which all other actions were built. It involved an on-going effort to establish warm and trusting relationships with each individual parent. Over time I established myself as somebody that parents felt comfortable to talk with and subsequently to work together with. Relationships were fostered through:

- informal chatting and being on first name basis with each parent and extended family member;
- making great effort to talk to all parents often;
- inviting parents to observe and help in class and inviting them to all school level functions;
- talking about myself to break down power structures of the traditional teacher-parent relationship;
- adopting a more flexible use of the classroom where parents were welcome throughout the day and the classroom became a hub for ‘family learning’;
- using a dedicated mobile phone to communicate with families.
In addition to the above list, my attitudinal stance toward forging relationships with parents was important. I sincerely wanted to connect interpersonally with each parent as I knew that this was the precursor to being able to collaborate with them. Some parents were very open and had personalities and personal situations that allowed relationships to form easily and quickly. Others were more reserved and reticent and I took it as a personal challenge to find a commonality on which we could begin to build a relationship.

In fact, I might describe my attitude towards these parents as ‘dogged’! I persisted when they avoided me and never took it personally, the more workshops, meetings and trips that were unattended, the harder I tried to reach them. I have found over the years that there is a certain tipping point which is reached where the parent is no longer reticent and avoidant and begins to engage. This might be borne out of a realisation that resistance is futile but I prefer to think that an interpersonal trust and regard has been established. Other parents simply come on board when they see that it is of benefit to their child and that their involvement is valued.

My desire to welcome the parents and families into the school community was so great that I often prioritised it over instruction time with the children. If a ‘hard to reach’ parent was open to chatting in the morning, I would continue to invest time in this while eating into the morning lesson. Establishing a trusting personal relationship with this parent mediated their subsequent involvement in initiatives designed to enhance their child’s EA and thus outweighed any ‘lost’ curricular time. I believe this represented a more child-centred approach where children were viewed in the context of a broader learning environment rather than beholden to the curriculum.

Building relationships also allowed me to work one-on-one with ‘hard to reach’ parents, whose children were most in need of extra support. I provided guidance, support, information, skills and resources to these parents informally on a one-on-one basis when they came to collect their child.

As parents knew and trusted me they were open to this process. My findings were as follows:

- Personal trusting relationships between me and parents encouraged their participation and attendance at initiatives;
- Establishing trusting personal relationships with ‘hard to reach parents’ facilitated their involvement in their child’s learning in the home;
- Building relationships and involving parents requires time, a willingness to evolve the traditional role of the teacher into a partnership orientated one, and an understanding of the social histories which have shaped parents’ attitudes.

**Action Two: In-School Workshops**

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) believe that the manner in which parents perceive their role in relation to their child’s education impacts on what actions they take toward it. As this role construction is socially constructed, teachers and schools have an opportunity to enhance it through structured experiences. Consequently, I used fortnightly workshops to convey to parents the primacy of their role in their children’s learning and to provide skills, knowledge and resources to enable them to support their children’s learning at home. Workshop topics included: the importance of literacy in the home, early numeracy in the home, why school attendance is important, positive parenting, homework and paired reading- how and why, and dental health. I also
collaborated with speakers from the local community to deliver workshops. My findings were as follows:

- Practical measures such as providing childcare and holding sessions just before children’s home time facilitated parents attendance at workshops;
- Parents were more likely to attend school workshops when their children were involved in them;
- Including children in workshops provided an opportunity to showcase their learning which in turn motivated parents’ involvement;
- Parents sent another family member if they were unable to attend;
- Parents were more likely to participate when they were involved in choosing workshop topics they felt were personally relevant;
- Fathers and other family members were keen to be involved when welcomed, often both parents attended;
- Shared understanding and goal setting between class teacher and home internalised parents’ motivation, i.e. parents were more likely to become involved when they understood the teaching and learning process espoused by the school so that it took on a personal meaning, e.g. why school attendance is important, why reading at home is important;
- Parents were motivated by their child’s success. This finding has an immediate implication for teachers where situations need to be created where parents can see this success.

**Action Three: Educational Trips**

The third action aimed to facilitate parents’ involvement in their child’s informal learning outside of school. Research literature suggested that middle and higher SES parents transfer advantages and skills to their children through the use of structured and language rich activities outside of school, or what Lareau (2003) termed ‘concerted cultivation’. These social activities in turn promote the growth of social capital through linking and bridging opportunities with the wider community (Bourdieu, 1977.) Thus the intention of the trips was to expose families to free and accessible activities in the local community. These trips were chosen on the basis that they provided opportunities for oral language and literacy development and gave access to local social and cultural events. The trips included, regular visits to the local library where children and their parents got library cards, local puppet shows, music workshops, local GAA club and educational trips to the local park. All family members were invited including younger siblings and extended family. My findings were as follows:
• Parental attendance on trips improved as trusting relationships were forged;
• Partnership with community organisations emerged as a way of contextualising and enriching learning by exposing parents to the educative potential in every-day experiences in their local community;
• Teacher designed in-school workshops and educational trips facilitated parents’ role as prime educator.

**Action Four: Parents Co-Teaching in Class**

In my experience, PI in the classroom setting positively impacts the quality of teaching and learning at school as it allows learning to take place in small differentiated groups. It also transfers skills to parents which can be utilised at home to enhance their child’s EA. A further rationale for in-class co-teaching is the belief that it provides an ideal context for the generation of parental self-efficacy in relation to children’s education. Self-efficacy refers to one’s belief in their capacity to succeed in a certain area. Several authors believe parental self-efficacy in regard to children’s learning is a vital factor in parents’ involvement (Shumow and Lomax, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 2005).

In the present study, parents received training to teach small differentiated groups in literacy and mathematics. My findings were as follows:

• In a series of interviews, parents reported that their own skills and confidence improved as a result of the training and subsequent in-class teaching. Interestingly, not only did their self-efficacy in relation to their child’s education develop, but their self-efficacy regarding their ability to engage in their own life-long learning;
• Parents reported that teaching enabled them to better understand and support their child’s learning in the home. The following excerpt from an interview with one mother highlights these findings:

  I felt more confident to go back to study, I done a communications course but after 6 months it got really hard, really hard, we had to write essays, I hate essays, but I done them, I had me internet on the bed and got my spellings off the internet, so I’m just waiting on me results now. It was the best thing I ever done (working in-class), hand on heart, they think my son is dyslexic and now I can help him with phonics. I can’t spell but I’m more confident now so we’ll sound it out and then check it in the dictionary, they’re learning and I’m learning. Whereas before, it was ‘Debbi go into your room do your homework’ because I didn’t want her asking me questions that I didn’t know, you know what I mean? The table comes out; the four kids sit around it so they can discuss their homework. Now it’s... I don’t know everything; the kids don’t know everything, so I’m learning as they’re learning- so we’re learning each other. But it’s all down, don’t get a big head now, it’s all down to coming in here, it was amazing, it really was. You pushed us, you’re good at that. You get complacent, and then your sort of at home while he’s (children’s father) out mixing at work. And you’re stuck at home same thing day in day out, no one to tell you you’re doing a good job. You come in here to the classroom, and you help the kids and at the end of the week or whatever you tell us, ‘You done a great job this week girls’. You’re taller you know, even though you brush it off and say don’t be stupid, but you walk taller. (15/12/2010)

• Recent standardised test scores (First Class summer tests) show that this class of seventeen students are performing significantly above state norms. Forty-seven percent of children scored in the top tenth percentile in reading and twenty-three and a half percent scored in the top tenth percentile in maths. No child scored below
the fortieth percentile in reading or below the thirtieth percentile in maths. This is particularly significant given the school’s DEIS 1 status;

- Whilst it is acknowledged that several variables confluence to effect EA, it is believed that parental involvement at home and in-class during Junior and Senior Infants played a significant role;
- While this class had six children who were members of the Travelling Community none of these children scored below the thirtieth percentile in mathematics or fortieth percentile in reading.

The following are some general findings of my study:

- When I expected parents to be involved in school initiatives and at home, parents accepted this as normative practice;
- When parents supported children’s learning at home children did better at school;
- I influenced parents’ expectations for their children;
- Many low SES parents had high expectations regarding their child’s education which often stemmed from regret at their own early school leaving;
- When parents became more involved their children’s attendance improved;
- School workshops, trips and parents teaching in class contributed to the development of parents’ role construction, self-efficacy and social capital;
- Most parents came to view themselves as their child’s Prime Educator and better understood the potential role they played in their child’s learning.

**Conclusion**

There is a large body of research on the effects of PI on students EA. The bulk of it is correlational and reiterates the idea that students benefit when their parents are involved. There are few studies however, which attempt to put this knowledge into practice. Through the use of action research, this study succeeded in involving a cohort of ‘hard to reach’ parents. This is of significance as apart from the HSCL scheme, which has not been found to improve student EA, there is little research in this area in Ireland despite the growing prevalence of PI in official policy. Crucially, this study offers insights into the protocol of how to actually get parents to participate in initiatives. I believe ‘hard to reach’ parents, including Traveller parents, became involved in the present study because:

- their past experiences were listened to and valued;
- their opinions were sought through a collaborative approach;
- informal and friendly relationships were fostered with the class teacher;
- they were warmly invited to participate;
- they got to know and trust me as a person;
- they knew I expected their involvement
- their involvement was regularly praised and valued;
- they were provided with opportunities to see their children’s improvement and success and were helped to understand their role in it;
- they were eager to be involved in initiatives that included their children;
- the children’s classroom was used as a centre for family learning and as such offered a less intimidating space for adult learning than might be offered by an outside agency;
- practical needs such as childcare and convenience regarding the time of when workshops were conducted were considered;
- the content of workshops was practical, relevant and achievable.
The new National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People (2011) acknowledges not only the significant attainment issues of disadvantaged students but of all Irish students. It recognises that ‘parental support can mitigate the negative effect of low SES or low parental educational attainment’ (DES, p.19). At present, many schools are failing to see that they can have an impact in enabling this parental support. It is my view that the school holds great potential as a vibrant hub for family learning.

The access to marginalised parents and the unique relationships that can be forged between class teacher and parents places the school in a unique position to influence family learning in a way that no other institution will have access to. However, the objectives relating to PI in the New National Strategy will only be realised if corresponding effort is given to evolving teacher attitudes and perceptions towards PI and their role in it. Welcoming parents as partners in their children's education also has a role to play in the democratic integrity of schools and has implications for issues of social justice. By meaningfully involving parents, we move toward a partnership model and eschew the didactic teacher-parent model that serves to disempower students and their families. It is an opportunity for schools to redress the current fact that they are involved in contributing to advantage and disadvantage in Irish society.

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Appendix II

Home-School Reading Project

A home – school book-sharing intervention for a group of junior infant children in a DEIS Band 1 school

Dympna Mulkerrins, Education Committee, District XIV

Introduction

Low scores on standardised assessments are linked to some hard-to-change characteristics such as unemployment, membership of the traveller community, lone parenthood, and large family size (Eivers et al., 2010). However, other positive characteristics are more amenable to change such as the number of books in the home, no TV in the bedroom, limited time on the internet/playing computer games, and parents who are willing to engage in reading. Therefore, with appropriate interventions, literacy standards could improve. For that reason and because of the significance attributed to the relationship between home background and achievement in literacy in all studies, the intervention described here will establish a structure for teachers and parents to collaborate in a home/school literacy project.

Section 1 gives an overview of the context and rationale for the proposed intervention. Section 2 explains aspects of educational disadvantage as it pertains to school achievement. It also reviews relevant important literature on how home background impacts on school attainment with particular focus on oral language and reading literacy. Building on this information, Part 3 outlines the benefits of working in partnership with parents and best practice in establishing partnerships. It also outlines a framework for engaging parents of targeted junior infants towards empowering them to collaborate meaningfully with teachers in their children’s oral language and reading literacy using a language approach in a DEIS Band 1 school.

Section 1

Many DEIS schools such as ours has Early Start preschool, extra staffing which ensures smaller classes, extra funding, participation in both the school completion programme (SCP) and home school community liaison (HSCL). These supports provide opportunities which would not have otherwise been possible. Over fifty per cent of our junior infants annually have participated in the Early Start preschool. This intervention project will be aimed at the parents whose children did not participate in Early Start. Over the years, we have found that such children come to the attention of the special needs team much earlier than children who attend Early Start. Therefore, it is hoped that this intervention, which will run during the children’s first term in primary school and in collaboration with HSCL and class teachers, might alleviate some of the difficulties those children experience early in their schooling. As I was a HSCL coordinator for a number of years, I know all the parents in our school community so no time needed be spent in establishing relationships at that level. Home visitation through the role of the current HSCL co-ordinator may be required for some of the targeted parents who may be unable or unwilling to engage with the school for this project. The special needs team will be involved in the programme also.
Rationale

International research confirms that the most significant effects on student educational outcomes continue to result from beyond the immediate school setting and these effects remain stubbornly persistent over time (Berliner, 2006). Decades of policies on educational disadvantage in Ireland have had only limited impact on the reading ability levels of children from disadvantaged backgrounds at a national level (National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), 2010). To achieve greater attainment in literacy in such schools is increasingly recognised as being a complex problem with no single solution (Kennedy, 2010). However, although practice differs from school to school, a vision is needed to make literacy for all children a reality, and one that involves supportive and complementary actions from parents, the school and the wider community. Hence the critical importance for our school of parent teacher collaboration aimed at achieving that vision of making literacy a reality.

The purpose of this project is to provide a framework for working collaboratively with parents to promote the development of interactive and meaningful child/parent book-sharing in the home, using a language approach. However, it means being cognisant of the fact that parents may be apprehensive or may lack confidence in their own abilities to effectively facilitate their own child’s literacy and language development. Therefore, sensitivity and carefully thought-out handling of this situation will be essential. Furthermore, we must be realistic in terms of our expectations of what can be achieved taking the implications of SES factors into account. The emphasis will be on a partnership approach based on mutual trust, respect, understanding and support so that the experience might empower parents to confidently scaffold their children during book-sharing time at home in the hope that they will see value in the process and that their children will benefit.

It is in this context that the proposed intervention will be established. The participants in this intervention constitute part of a disadvantaged low SES minority group in Irish society and SES has been deemed a key factor in acquisition of language.

Eivers et al. (2004) also acknowledge the interrelationship between phonemic awareness and oral language in young children. Citing Roth, Speece and Cooper (2002) they state ‘children with limited oral vocabularies may also be limited in their ability to develop phonemic awareness for spoken words because they have an insufficient pool of words to reflect on and analyse..’ (p.8). It is possible therefore that some participant children may not have the prerequisite language skills for phonemic awareness and consequently will be inhibited in their ability to develop the decoding skills necessary for reading literacy. This finding is pertinent to the proposed intervention and associated implications will be addressed at the planning stage. Participant parents will need to be informed about some of the study findings outlined here as it may influence their commitment to the project which could yield long-term positive implications for their children’s reading literacy learning and wider academic achievements. Furthermore, they will need to know that, concurrently, teachers will be mediating an oral language and literacy curriculum in school which is matched to the differentiated needs of the children involved. Due to the constraints of this project however, only the parent/teacher aspect will be elaborated on in this paper.

Therefore, as the participants of this intervention come from low income backgrounds and have not attended any preschool, both its necessity and more importantly, its success are essential.
It is findings such as these that have motivated the pursuance of this intervention and that will be at the core of the philosophical underpinnings of the project. As an experienced teacher, I would concur with findings that parental engagement with their children’s school work, however small, has generally impacted positively on the child’s participation in classroom learning. It appears therefore, that teachers need to understand that, although the likelihood is that the intervention will yield varying levels of participation and success, nevertheless the associated effort involved is valuable and worthwhile.

In the absence of early intervention in language and literacy, the participant junior infants who had no pre-school experience may start their early schooling at a disadvantage which could have serious consequences for their life-chances. However, the studies examined above provide hope that appropriate and structured early intervention such as this one could provide the basis for long-term attainment in literacy and in the wider curriculum.

From my experience in HSCL, ‘encouragement’ in our school context will need to be proactively school-led in a respectful and collaborative manner. Family structures, time, parents own literacy levels as well as individual parent’s participation in and experience of school must be considered also (Partridge, 2004).

Section 2

Intervention content: some philosophical underpinnings

In the context of our school and with reference to the literature reviewed, parent/child interactions in this intervention will revolve around the promotion of language acquisition and emergent literacy knowledge. Parent-child book-sharing experiences provide a natural context in which children can learn the form and function of print and the relationship between oral and written language. The powerful influence of joint book sharing on children’s language acquisition provides a rich focused environment during which parents and their children can label items in illustrations, describe narrative events, predict a story’s sequence and share experiences relevant to the story (Ezell, Justice and Parsons, 2000). Such central elements will underpin this intervention as it is unlikely that books would be a priority in many of the participants’ homes.

Key role of teachers

The intervention’s success will depend on the interest, understanding, and commitment of teachers as it aims to empower parents to engage meaningfully in oral discourse with their children through the vehicle of story books. It will be important to explain to parents that a parallel differentiated oral language programme is being mediated simultaneously, albeit at a deeper level, in the classroom through which teachers strive daily to develop the child’s oral ability to match the oral demands of school. However, structuring and managing such an intervention into a meaningful and manageable framework for our parents while possible, could prove challenging. A structured vocabulary development element will be included and parents will be trained in its use through discussing, modelling and observing. An intensive focus on developing oral language as a basis for the children’s literacy and broader learning is also likely to be an identified need for many of targeted participants. To that end, the broad content of both the school and the home/school programmes will incorporate the four elements of language acquisition - developing the listener speaker relationship, vocabulary
development (meaning content), sentence structure and structuring the different uses of language – with participant parents.

**Development of listener speaker rapport, vocabulary and sentence structure**

Vocabulary development is a key challenge during the preschool period and vocabulary size is highly correlated to reading ability (Nagy and Herman, 1987). Wide and intensive interactive reading is considered to be one significant way for children to learn many more relatively infrequent words: thus only good and avid readers have optimal opportunities to expand their vocabularies according to Ely (1989). Book-reading with preschoolers can be a major stimulus for vocabulary development and language input is a major predictor of speed of vocabulary acquisition. Chall (1987) found that vocabulary relates to reading skill and to the amount of time spent on interactive reading both in the preschool period and in school age children. Children who hear more words per unit of time learn more words and they need several exposures to a word to learn it.

Hayes & Ahrens (1988) contend that books provide a structured presentation of a richer vocabulary and span context areas that might never emerge in casual conversation. In a study of 4 year olds from low income families, Wasik and Bond (2001) found that book-related words increased vocabulary and improved language structure if the book reading was interactive, stimulated child-talk, provided a rich semantic context for novel vocabulary items and repeated words often enough. Furthermore, young children with greater vocabularies tend to request book reading more than those with smaller vocabularies. Book reading may not be indispensable to vocabulary development but it provides a particularly efficient and effective context not only for supporting vocabulary extension, but also for developing good listener speaker rapport and sentence structure. As children’s vocabulary grows word learning becomes easier and Jordan, Porche and Snow (2000) argue that environments that support word learning permit children to engage in conversations with adults, during which the child is supported to find opportunities to use words that they are in the process of acquiring. It is hoped that the proposed intervention will achieve this.

**Language uses**

A key feature of this intervention will be discussion around books. This is how, according to Snow, Tabors, Nicholson & Kurland (1995) preschool children’s participation in talk around books enhances the growth of their literacy skills. Finding ways that the intervention programme will be manageable for parents so that they can comfortably engage with their children while interactively sharing a story book will be critically important; thus enabling them to support their child to engage with the different uses of language: to name, describe, retell, narrate, infer, hypothesize will be intrinsic to the intervention programme. Evidence by Morrow (1992) reported that ‘talk around the text’ or getting children to think about what was going on in the story were considered to be central to literacy growth. Teale & Martinez (1996) argued that well-structured teacher / parent oral interactive style is essential to better story retelling (comprehension) by children: the adult must engage in an approach characterised by attention to important story information and elicit responses from the child before and during reading and after reading (about the story episodes).
The centrality of decontextualised language

According to Dickinson & Smith (1994) building ideas from words is essential to comprehending and learning from text; they contend that the value of experience with de-contextualised language, which they consider to be a key contributor to becoming literate, is derived from talking about the ideas presented in story books. Thus, the best way to encourage children’s responses is to focus on important story ideas and support the child to reflect, rather than expecting a quickly retrieved answer. In order to build children's language abilities such effective strategies need to be consistently used in book sharing activities. This is something worth sharing with participant parents.

Children need to be supported to make sense of decontextualised language: to be prompted to think through ideas, and supported to connect them and to express them as they develop their understanding of the story. Perhaps, too often they are merely asked questions focussing on more obvious information: for example, 'Where did he go?' which could be answered in a word or two with information retrieved directly from the story. Dickinson and Smith’s (1994) detailed examination of interactive book sharing in preschool classrooms revealed features that are particularly effective: specifically they found that the interaction that occurred as a story was being read, that involved both parents and teachers, and that were analytic in nature (reflecting on the story and on the language) led to positive effects both on preschoolers’ vocabulary and story comprehension. Section 3 of this paper will detail the necessary scaffolding to be provided by the school to empower the parents whose children did not attend Early Start to participate meaningfully in such book sharing activities.

Concluding Comment

A strong case has been made for involving parents in the literacy learning of children from low SES backgrounds. Literacy is one of the critical developmental accomplishments of early and middle childhood and is learned mainly through social interactions with for example, parent and child frequently sharing quality time reading and discussing books (Rogoff, 2003). As we have seen, on the one hand such activities appear to be critical for vocabulary development, emergent literacy and oral discourse skills while at the same time, there is evidence that low achievement in literacy can have serious negative effects on life’s chances. The review of literature was not intended to be exhaustive but rather to confirm the academic value of parent child interaction in book-sharing in the early years. Effective and meaningful realisation of this project will combine collaboration and partnership between teachers and parents. This will be discussed in Section 3 where the implementation plan will also be outlined.

Section 3

Design and implementation plan for working in partnership with parents on a home-school reading initiative

Working in partnership with parents

Parents were key participants in this intervention project as they implemented the programme at home. Therefore, it was important that the school worked on a partnership basis with them so that once enlisted, the parents would continue to interact with their children’s book-sharing to the end of the programme and beyond. For that reason a partnership model of collaboration was needed. Partnership is defined as
a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and a willingness to negotiate. This implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision making and accountability (Pugh & De De’Ath, 1989, p. 5).

This definition of partnership may be both ambitious for the school to accede to and/or challenging for parents to identify with; nevertheless, if we are sincere about our professional commitment to this intervention, it’s one that must be aspired to. In the context of our school the purpose of this level of partnership (between parents and teachers) is to ‘enhance pupils’ learning opportunities and to promote their retention within the school system’ (Conaty, 2002, p. 69). In analysing partnership with parents in the Irish primary school, Conaty advocates continuity between the home and school. She cites Clark (1992) to explain that this continuity ‘reduces conflict for children, reinforces learning and eases the transition between the two environments’ (Conaty, 2002, p.41). The confidence and competence of participant parents should be enhanced through this process of partnership which in terms of parent development has been described as ‘the highest level of development’ because they will become ‘a resource for their own children’s learning’ (Conaty, 2000, p. 41). It is my hope that this development will ultimately enhance the children’s oral linguistic and literacy learning thus making the broader curriculum more accessible to them.

The content of the programme

It was hoped that if the parents were provided with information, support, affirmation and strategies through explaining and modelling they would become empowered to offer significant support to their own children’s emergent literacy and oral language. The programme outlined below was introduced in an environment that was non-threatening and supportive.

The programme comprised four main elements:

1. **Development of the Listener /speaker relationship**
   Teachers should demonstrate strategies to ensure children are engaged as listeners and speakers. Parents should be alerted to the importance of turn taking, maintaining eye contact as a speaker or listener as a means of developing listening and oral discourse skills. There should also be parent / teacher dialogue about the value of using a story book as a vehicle to deepen affective child / parent bonding.

2. **Explanation of meaning content**
   Vocabulary should be developed / extended as word knowledge will be based on the language found in the books used in the programme and new vocabulary will be used in different contexts. Groups of words and a number of phrases from the text should be a specific focus for vocabulary development. Teachers should model how to do this using a big story books and provide lists of relevant words for parents based on specific books on a weekly basis

3. **Oral presentation of language structure**
   Teachers should model verb usage using big story books. Verb tense and stringing words cohesively to model correct formation of sentences should be demonstrated each week so that parents could model sentence structure for their child during book-sharing time at home.

4. **Explanation of the different uses of language**
   Teachers should model in relation to
(i) Naming what they see in the illustration, unknown items and recasting to expand on the child’s utterances;
(ii) Describing the parts of a book, the illustrations, the characters; what is happening in an illustration;
(iii) Predicting what the story might be about with reference to illustrations and title;
(iv) Retelling: linking words to construct a number of sentences - scaffolding the child to tell the story in sequence (beginning – middle – end);
(v) Using de-contextualised language thereby understanding the value of challenging the child to think beyond the immediate; enabling parents to develop oral discourse skills such as inferring and deducing in their children – with comments or questions such as: I wonder what...? I wonder why.....? Why do you think......?

Implementing the home/school intervention

It was proposed that this intervention would span six weeks during October / November 2011 with junior infants who did not attend Early Start preschool. Informal relationships with the parents of these children were developed between class teachers, HSCL and SEN coordinators from September to ensure better parental participation in the programme. The intervention was coordinated by the SEN coordinator in consultation with HSCL, learning support / resource teachers and junior infant teachers.

SEN and HSCL coordinators researched and purchased sets of suitable story picture books for weekly book packs for home use. They also met the parent group in the school each week at a time agreed in advance with parents. A memo was given to each parent as a reminder at dismissal time a day or two in advance of meeting (See Note 1). A cup of tea was available at the beginning of each meeting to ease parents into the school environment and group situation.

HSCL, through home visitation, offered support to parents who could not or did not participate in the intervention in school. On-going personal contact / support was maintained each day between parents and teachers; class teachers engaged with parents at reception time and HSCL and SEN coordinators liaised with them regularly. Colourful book packs were provided by the school and included 2/3 story books per week, a copy book and stickers to enter the name of each book and a sticker as a reward for the child for each book read. Laminated cards, providing clear guidelines for parents with trigger cues/prompts/ questions on how to interact with their child in book sharing, were based on the four elements of the programme as outlined above (See Note 2). During the weekly meetings teachers listened to parents’ experiences with the home programme, affirmed them and encouraged ongoing participation. Books were exchanged also and teachers modelled good practice in relation to each element of language through the use of a big book. The date and time of the following meeting was agreed with parents before they left. Using a big book, teachers modelled, on a weekly basis how:

• to name the different parts of a book cover, front, back, pages, spine, top, bottom; the title, in context;
• to name and say who author, illustrator, characters are;
• to show the child the reading direction;
• adults can fine tune their talk in the interactive setting to provide maximum support and maximum challenge to the child by prompting and cueing for response, responding to child’s initiation, affirming child’s ideas and questioning for more information;
to use appropriate language for example, when talking about the story use vocabulary and phrases from the text, identify group of words or phrases which are to be a specific focus for vocabulary development (provide word lists), explain their meaning, and find ways to have the child use them during the story and in other contexts;

• to challenge the child through contributing ideas to develop the story (*I was wondering if...*) or challenging the child to consider/ explain events and /or motivations.

**Monitoring and evaluating the intervention**

The weekly meetings provided adequate opportunity to monitor the programme on an on-going basis. Furthermore all information gleaned from parents through informal conversations between class teachers, SEN, HSCL and parents at reception and dismissal times was taken on board by teachers. The class teacher monitored the home school booklet which logged books read at home and affirmed parents as appropriate. Parents were brainstormed at the final weekly meeting about what went well during the six weeks, and how it might have been better. Issues raised in relation to the content, approaches, methods and resources were discussed. All teachers involved met subsequently to do a similar exercise. Issues were taken on board for future intervention projects and even for broader use in subsequent home/school literacy programmes in the school.

**Conclusion**

This intervention aimed to facilitate parents from a disadvantaged community whose children did not attend pre-school to interact meaningfully with their children to share books at home. The language of schooling involves layers of oral complexity which need to be internalised if the child is to be enabled to engage with the broader curriculum – if not, as we have seen children are at a severe disadvantage from the start of their schooling. On a daily basis I try to facilitate the learning of many children who present with ‘discontinuities’ in language, who do not have the ‘linguistic features of the language of schooling’ (Schleppegrell, 2001). According to Weitzman et al., (2004) children can produce rich and complex responses to text when invited to do so but teachers sometimes fail to exploit the full potential of language. Therefore, schools need to activate children’s potential to master de-contextualised language in order to meet the increasing complexity of the oral demands that they will encounter in school. This intervention supported each child’s narrative skills by enabling them to use explicit vocabulary to retell a story in sequence, with cohesion between sentences and increase the child’s opportunities to respond to decontextualised language in meaningful contexts. Thus, parents and children were introduced to the ‘language of schooling’ thereby developing the child’s listener /speaker skills, vocabulary, sentence structure and higher order thinking as outlined in Section 3: story books were the vehicle used for this parent/child interaction because of the significance attached to the learning that can take place during parent/child oral discourse using story books in all literature examined.
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Scoil...  September 2011

Parents of: ____________________

We hope that your little girl has settled well in to Junior Infants at this stage!

As you know, we are starting a home/school reading programme with children in Junior Infants and we are delighted that you have agreed to be part of that.

Parents, their child and teachers will work together to make this an enjoyable and useful experience for everybody, but especially for the children.

This programme aims to make sure that your child will learn to use books well, to love books and to engage with you happily by talking about the story when you share a book together.

Teachers will be available to offer every support needed.

We would love to meet all the parents together to get the programme off to a good start. Parents are always a wonderful support to each other.

Parents have already said that next Tuesday 1st October seems to be a good day to meet. Therefore, we look forward to welcoming you all to the Parents’ Room at 12.30 on Tuesday. The tea/coffee will be ready!

We will chat about what is to be done and every family will get a lovely user-friendly book-pack to take home.

We will finish before 1.30 so you won’t be late collecting your child from class.

We look forward to meeting you next week. We might even send a text as a reminder on Monday!

With every good wish,

____________________
Helpful ideas for parents when sharing a story book with your young child

These are good questions to use when talking to your child about to make meaning of a picture:


Some important points to remember!
1. Find a quiet place with no distractions AND if possible turn off the television!
2. Sit at an angle to one another so you can observe good adult/child eye contact
3. Take turns speaking and listening – remember that parent and child must listen and speak to each other!
4. In general, use full sentences when responding – the adult must model this for the child!

BEFORE READING
Discuss the front cover:
• Read the title – get children to predict what might happen in the story (this will help activate any prior knowledge they have).
• Mention the author – what do they do?
• Mention the illustrator – what do they do?
• I wonder what this story might be about? Why do you think that? (refer child to the title and the cover illustration)
• The setting – where is this story happening? Why do you think that?
• What can you see in the picture?
• Discuss colours of different items on cover?
• Ask child to name important items on cover illustration.
• Who do you see and what are they doing?
• I wonder will this be a happy story or a sad one? Why do you think that?

WHILE READING THE BOOK
• Read the story slowly - pausing to show the pictures and to discuss what’s happening in the illustrations
• Encourage children to join in with any repetition in text.
• Encourage them to participate and predict as reading progresses --- Ask: I wonder what might happen next?

AFTER READING THE BOOK
• Did you enjoy this book? Why/Why not? (Tell children why you did/did not enjoy it ---- good modelling).
• Can you name the characters in the story? (show pictures to help and prompt)
• Support child retell the story using the pictures to help – they may need you to model this.

Remember – this is meant to be a fun learning experience for parent and child so relax and encourage your child all the time.
Appendix III

Successful Literacy Power Hour in an Urban DEIS School

Our ‘Power Hour’ - A whole-class Literacy Intervention.

Martin Lynch, Education Committee, D. IX.
(with thanks to the staff and parents in St. Patrick’s G.N.S., Ringsend, Valerie Coveney and Mary Moore, St. Laurence O’Toole J.B.N.S. and Mairead Hennessy P.D.S.T.)

Introduction
Over the past number of years, many primary schools around the country have undertaken whole class literacy interventions / initiatives in an effort to improve the competency levels of their pupils in oral language, reading and writing. The origins of these interventions have varied, somewhat. They have been presented under different titles and have undergone varying methods of implementation. It is quite possible that, because of the variation both in titles and methods of implementation, many schools are put off ever considering such an initiative in their own particular situations.

I hope, in this article, to provide a basic description and explanation of how our Literacy Hour works and by so doing, I hope I can provide some practical assistance and encouragement to help alleviate some of the fears and anxieties that may be of concern to any school considering the introduction of such a whole class literacy initiative. I would in no way claim to be an expert in this area, but, having overseen the introduction of one of those same initiatives to our school, I have gained some experience that may be of use to others. Just as we, in our school, were given the benefit of others’ initial experience, we have also welcomed and facilitated any other schools that have since wished to view our initiative in action. We never claimed to be doing anything original, or unique, and were always ready to rethink and review our practices, as we developed and progressed.

In its early stages, all staff members involved witnessed the challenges, doubts, nerves and teething problems that went with our initiative. Thankfully, all of these have, long since, been consigned to the past and any initial fears that we may have had, have been well and truly outweighed by the many worthwhile rewards and benefits gained from having taken on the challenge. Our ‘Power Hour’, as we chose to call it, works in its own particular way. Because no two schools are similar, it is inevitable that there will always be some differences in how any initiative is implemented. Variations, for example, in size of school, staffing or funding will, naturally, play a huge part in the breadth and scale of any initiative undertaken. In a small school, for example, it is highly likely that such an initiative, as described here, would be given little or no consideration. There is a strong chance that it might even be dismissed out of hand. I would, however, encourage any school to at least explore the possibility of adapting some of the ideas and elements contained in these initiatives. It certainly has paid dividends in our school.

Background
In 2006-2007, our school was afforded the opportunity to have a teacher trained in ‘Reading Recovery’. At the end of the teacher’s training, I attended the final session. At this session, some of the attendees mentioned that their schools had extended their
‘Reading Recovery’ model into what they referred to as ‘Power Hour’ or ‘Hour of Power’ initiatives in their schools. It meant nothing to me at the time. In mid-2007, I happened to be discussing literacy at a local forum in central Dublin with the then principal of St. Laurence O’Toole’s Junior Boys’ N.S. in Sherriff Street, who informed me that they had such an initiative going on in her school. I asked if I could see it in action, and our ‘Reading Recovery’ (Learning Support) and Resource Teacher accompanied me on the visit. While we thought we had a reasonable idea, in advance, of how it worked, it still seemed quite confusing and daunting, when we saw it in action. It appeared far more complicated than we had imagined. Fortunately, the teacher who was taking Senior Infants for 2008-2009, was very taken with the idea and placed a lot of blind faith and trust in undertaking it in its first year in the school.

By the time everything was in place and we had given the idea much thought, it was after Hallowe’en in 2008 when we got it up and running. This delay later turned out to be something of a blessing in disguise and, since then, we have maintained early November as our starting point, each year. By keeping to this, it allows us to continue to target the previous year’s Senior Infants’ Class (the new 1st Class) up to Mid Term and helps us to re-focus them after the Summer Holidays. Effectively, our ‘Power Hour’ year runs, with the same children, from November in Senior Infants to November in 1st Class.

The Concept
Our school’s Literacy ‘Power Hour’ provides for a very intensive hour of literacy work four times a week, Monday through Thursday, from 11 am – 12pm. This work takes place at four separate and distinct stations within the classroom. These include two stations dedicated to guided reading (at which we use the PM+ Reader series), one station dedicated to Phonic work and the fourth to Writing / Dictation exercises. Parents are introduced to the idea before we begin each November and the importance of their role in the process is outlined. Once the Power Hour is established, they are then invited to drop in after a few weeks, at their convenience, if they wish to see it in action in the classroom. Over the year, the children get to read approximately 100 books each, reading every book five times. They have four books on the go at any time, at varying degrees of familiarity, ranging from the ‘New Book’, which they see for the first time on any day, to Book 4, which they return to the teacher, on any given day, having read it three times in class and twice, at home, with their parents. In this way, there is a continuous turnover of books and the books are aligned, as closely as possible, with each groups’ instructional level of reading. The class is divided into four groups and each group is assigned a particular colour from Red, Blue, Green and Yellow. Similarly coloured plastic baskets/boxes are used to retain and distribute the books to each group, prior to, and during ‘Power Hour’. To complement the reading element of the initiative, they also undertake intensive Phonic work and Writing/Dictation work.

The Practice
Every Monday to Thursday morning, as the Senior Infants go out to Morning Break, a few tables are moved to set up the room for ‘Power Hour’, which begins immediately after the break. The two tables/stations dedicated to reading are comprised of single tables, so that the children are close together and can be heard clearly by the teacher in charge of those stations. The Phonic Work and Dictation stations each have two tables together, as the work done at these stations requires more space for the children.

When the children return from break, they go to the table/station at which their group begins their ‘Power Hour’ each day. They each have a heavy duty mesh A5 zip bag, bearing that child’s name and the colour of their group. This folder goes to and from school carrying two books home on any given night. At the beginning of Power Hour,
however, their zipper bags only contain one book each. This book has been home for one night, will be read again in class at the start of Power Hour and will return home for its 2nd and final night that afternoon. When they arrived in school in the morning, their zipper bag contained two books. One of these had been home for its 2nd night, on the previous night, and had, effectively, completed its rotation of five readings - 3 in class and 2 at home. The children automatically, on arrival in school, return this book to the appropriately coloured basket for their group. Immediately following Break, the children and their Class Teacher are joined by the Resource Teacher, the Learning Support Teacher and myself. We each sit at our own stations, joining the group that starts at that particular station each morning. And so it begins...

Firstly, the children take out the book that is in their zipper bag and read it for the teacher at their starting station. When read, that book is returned to the folder and will make its final journey home that evening. The following morning, that is the book which will be returned, first thing to the coloured boxes. Once these books have been read through, the ‘Power Hour’ proper begins...

The Stations

1. ‘New Book’ Station - In our case, the Learning Support Teacher, who is also our Reading Recovery Teacher, looks after this station. Beside her are four coloured plastic boxes. These contain the next books that each group is due to start in the structured sequence on that day. These are referred to as the ‘New Books’ and have been placed in the coloured boxes by the Class Teacher earlier that morning. The number of copies of each book in any box will equate to the number of children in the group at the same level. The children are seeing these books for the first time, so the teacher goes through the various elements and strategies with them, associated with the first viewing of a book. They read the book together and the teacher retains and returns the books to their coloured boxes. In the rotation of books, we can refer to this as Book 1.

2. Writing / Dictation Station - I look after this station and decided, from the beginning, to use structured and sequenced dictation exercises as a means of extending their Phonics exercises. In this way, they can be guided through their writing from initial, simple ‘cvc’ words, on to basic sentences, using ‘cvc’ words to begin with7. From there, they progress on to more complicated sentences, which gradually increase in difficulty.

3. ‘Familiar Reading’ Station – The ‘Familiar’ element of this station refers, simply, to the fact that they have already seen these books, as ‘New Books’, the previous day. Before the ‘Power Hour’ begins, the Class Teacher simply moves the previous day’s ‘New Books’ over to the similarly coloured boxes/ baskets at this station. Here, they get to go through these books for a second time, before they go into their zipper bags to go home with them for the first of two nights. This book can now be referred to as Book 2 in the books’ rotation and this joins the book (Book 3), which they read together at the start of ‘Power Hour’, and Book 2 now goes home for its first night, to be read with their parents for the first time.

4. Phonics Station – The Children’s Class teacher runs this station. This can be used for any element of the phonics programme, or related activity, that the teacher chooses to highlight on a particular day or over a period of time. Activities could include: flashcards (single/double letter sounds), building ‘cvc’

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7 Consonant-Vowel-Consonant words
words (blocks and mats game), initial and final blend board games, alphabet games (ordering letters), working with mini whiteboards and markers (writing a sound, putting words in sentences), ‘I hear with my little ear’ (Teacher says sound and child finds it. Teacher writes a word with sound missing. Teacher says word and child fills in missing sound), recognising ‘Tricky’ words, magic ‘e’ board games and so on.

In our Literacy ‘Power Hour’, the teachers remain at their stations and the children move from one to the other. After the 10-12 minutes are up, or when all teachers feel their station’s work for that day is finished, the Class Teacher announces that they should get ready to change and off they go to their next station, as quietly as possible!

Materials and Organisation

Classroom Layout for Literacy Hour - 4 Stations

Reading
We chose to go with PM+ Readers for the project. These were the books we saw in use in St Laurence O’Toole’s School and they are also being used in the school in Reading Recovery. They come in 24 Levels, with 10 different books at each level. We bought 6 sets of each Level (24 Levels X 10 different books at each level X 6 copies of each book), which meant that at any level we could cater for any group of up to and including 6 children. The books are stored in plastic boxes in the corridor outside the classroom, with one Level in each box (10 X 6 books).

The Class Teacher keeps a log of the Level at which each of the 4 groups is reading at any given time. Each morning of Power Hour, she picks the next readers for each group from the storage box of the appropriate Level for each group and places them in their coloured boxes at the ‘New Book’ Station. As she does this, she transfers the previous day’s New Books over to the corresponding boxes at the ‘Familiar Reading’ Station. From these boxes she takes the books (Book 4), returned that morning by the children, and puts them back in storage. In this manner, each book does a basic rotation, which includes 5 readings and goes as follows:

**Day 1** – from storage to the ‘New Book’ Station coloured boxes and read for the first time (1)
**Day 2** – From ‘New Book’ boxes to ‘Familiar Reading’ Station boxes, read with the teacher, (2) placed in their zipper bags, and taken away to be read at home (3).
**Day 3** – From home to school, to be read in school (4) and brought home again and read there, again (5).
**Day 4** – The book returns from home to school, is removed from the zipper bag, first thing in the morning by the child, and returned to their group’s box. It is then returned by the teacher to storage.

The rotation continues with the next reader following immediately behind. The zipper bags used are strong mesh ones. As with most similar bags, their zips are already colour co-ordinated and can be allocated to each group, putting individual names on the correct coloured bag. A5 bags are large enough for the books.

Phonics
Any number of appropriate materials can be used at this station. We use ‘Jolly Phonics’, so materials are readily available to buy or make for related activities. Most schools already have many materials that could be put to effective use at particular times. These could include sound flashcards, phonics jigsaws, rhyming words, tricky words, and mini
whiteboards for free writing exercises. The work here can be selected by the class teacher to fit in with work already being undertaken in class or as preparatory work.

**Writing / Dictation**
As already outlined, the writing element of our ‘Power Hour’ focuses on the use of dictation exercises. Each child has a wide-lined copy (ASJO9). The child’s name is written on the copy and a coloured sticker is added to indicate the group to which the child belongs. The teacher distributes and collects the copies for each group as they sit down at the station and move on to the next station. These are stored close to the Writing Station.

To begin with, each copy has a couple of pages ruled in columns. The first exercises focus on single short vowel words. These are then developed into short sentences and, gradually, the sentences progress through carefully structured extensions, slowly adding new word beginnings and endings, letter blends and strings, in keeping with each group’s understanding and readiness to progress. A comprehensive list of sentences is used and each group can move forward at its own pace. Progress can be easily monitored along with attention to detail in such areas as penmanship, use of capital letters and punctuation. See below for the ‘Power Hour Dictation Lists & Sequences’ that are used in our school.

**General**
Without a doubt, having a whole-class literacy intervention takes quite a deal of organisation, expense and flexibility. It can even seem quite chaotic at times. Problems do arise. It can be difficult to cover all the stations every day. Occasionally someone won’t be available for the hour. The process calls for a good deal of commitment and patience. Once it is established, however, it runs very smoothly. The only minor difficulty that can arise, now and again, is that some children will simply forget to return their books to the coloured boxes in the morning or may just, lazily, return a book to the wrong coloured box. The results and rewards, however, are very impressive. We have found that, not alone are the children showing huge improvements in their literacy levels, they are also gaining so much in organisational skills, co-operative skill and maturity. We are now in our fourth year of the intervention and, quite frankly, there is no going back. We will never be returning to class readers and the restrictions and limitations we now see that these can impose. At first hand, we see how children learn to read by reading. Supported in such a regular and meaningful way by their parents and teachers, they are actively involved and challenged in their progress and take great pride in their achievements.

**Suggested Classroom Layout for Literacy ‘Power Hour’**

*(4 Stations – Clockwise rotation)*

| A ‘Warm-up’ (All Stations at same time)- All 4 Stations begin each ‘Power Hour’ with the children reading through **Book 3** with the teacher at that station. This is the book that has already been home for 1 night and is going home again, that evening, for its 2nd and final night. These are taken out, read and returned to their zipper bags. Following this, each group begins the normal activity for the station at which they begin each ‘Power Hour’. When each group reaches the ‘Familiar Reading’ Station on any day, **Book 2** is added to the zipper bag to go home for its 1st night. The folder then contains 2 books, going home. |
1. ‘New Book’ Station
(The new book introduced each day…)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blue Group Box Book 1</th>
<th>Red Group Box Book 1</th>
<th>Yellow Group Box Book 1</th>
<th>Green Group Box Book 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • From storage ‘New Books’ added to each group’s colour coded box in the morning.  
• First viewing – books are ‘explored’ and read for first time.  
• Books returned to boxes (ready to be moved on to ‘Familiar Reading’ Station boxes for next day). Children at this station move next to ‘Phonics’ Station. |

2. Phonics Station

- Children engage in individual or group activities chosen by Class Teacher.  
- Some suggestions are included in the main piece.  
- Following this, children at this station move to ‘Familiar Reading’ Station.

3. ‘Familiar Reading’ Station

(previous day’s ‘New Books’)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blue Group Box Book 2</th>
<th>Red Group Box Book 2</th>
<th>Yellow Group Box Book 2</th>
<th>Green Group Box Book 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Following the ‘Familiar Reading’ Station, each group moves here and takes their group’s colour coded writing copies.  
• Sentences for dictation are enunciated clearly and repeated as many times as necessary. Punctuation and other areas of grammar are emphasised |

- At this station, the children are guided through the reading of the previous day’s ‘New Book’. They then take this home for the first of 2 nights.

Suggested ‘Power Hour’ Dictation Lists & Sequence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. ‘cvc’ (Single word Columns)</th>
<th>2. ‘cvc’ ‘a’ (Sentences)</th>
<th>3. ‘cvc’ ‘e’ + ‘a’ (Sentences)</th>
<th>4. ‘cvc’ ‘e’+’a’+’o’+’u’ (Sents..)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| had men got mug sit big ran pet log rub fix pin jam hen box cup lid rag set not rug bin
| Dad had a mat in the cab. The bad cat had the ham. Pat ran to the van Sam sat at the dam. Mam has a rag at the tap. The man has a fan in the van.  
| The men had a net in the bag. Ben has a red pen set. Rex has the leg of ham. Mam fed the hens. Ned met Peg at the den. I met Sam at the jet.  
| Sam has got a job. The mad mob got Ted in the fog. The fox cub ran to the hut. The men dug in the bog. I put the mug on the cup. The pups and the cats are fed.  
| had men got mug sit big ran pet log rub fix pin jam hen box cup lid rag set not rug bin
| Dad had a mat in the cab. The bad cat had the ham. Pat ran to the van Sam sat at the dam. Mam has a rag at the tap. The man has a fan in the van.  
| The men had a net in the bag. Ben has a red pen set. Rex has the leg of ham. Mam fed the hens. Ned met Peg at the den. I met Sam at the jet.  
| Sam has got a job. The mad mob got Ted in the fog. The fox cub ran to the hut. The men dug in the bog. I put the mug on the cup. The pups and the cats are fed.  

5. ‘e’+’a’+’o’+’u’+’i’ (Sents..)  
6. + ‘cvec’ words...  
7. + ‘cvec’ words...  
8. + ‘cvec’ words...
Do not rub the wet rug.
I put the bud in the pot.
I can get Ted at ten.
Dan had ten fat hens.
Jim sat on top of the bin.
Mum hid the guns in the red hut.
Sam got a big pig and a dog.
I sat on the pin.
Kim hit Pat in the ribs.
Mum rips the rags.
Jim put the lid on the log box.
Dan has a box of buns.
Tim had to sit in the wet pit.
Can Dan fix the cot for Mum?
Mum got a big hug.
Sa
1. The doll sat on the big hill.
2. Sam got to fill the red cup.
3. Jim fell and hit his leg.
4. The bell is on top of the mat.
5. Will I sell the doll for a big bill?
6. The bull ran up to the top of the hill.
7. Mum fell and her hat hit the bell.
8. The cat is not in the cot.
9. The man got a cod on the rod.
10. It was a big mess.
11. Toss the ball to me!
12. The duck was by the big sack.
13. Pick up the sack and put it in the hut.
15. Put the lock back in the pack.
16. Kick the ball into the back of the sack.
17. Lift the sack and let it sit on the hill.
18. I left the duck and the doll at the back of the wet logs.
19. Fill the loft and kick the rat back to the soft net.
20. Melt the milk and lock it in the full mill.

9. + ‘ceve’ and ‘cevce’ words

1. We saw the flag flap in the wind.
2. I was glad that we went west.
3. There was a black blob on the pink tent.
4. Stop the clock and run up to

10. + ‘ceve’ and ‘cevce’ words

1. I can smell the shrimp that I got from that pond.
2. Swing to the end of the cliff and jump then.

11. + ‘Magic e’ and vowel digraphs

1. What time is it on the clock in the hall?
2. Wake up or you will miss the bus for school.

12. + vowel digraphs

1. We went to sleep for a week in my nana’s.
2. Keep three teeth under your pillow.
3. Where will I find a short book to

Literacy in a Changing World
117
the cliff.
5. That plump slug fell on the flat rock.
6. Bring me that flat brick from the damp wall.
7. I went for a brisk run to the cliff.
8. Bang that drum and clap your hands.
9. The clock was ringing but I slept very well.
10. Flap your wings and jump from the black rock.
11. We went to the club for a big feed.
12. My arm was in a sling after I fell in the crisp frost.
13. Clap at the end of the happy song.
14. The crab hid under the flat rock in the pond.
15. We saw the slim slug slip under the black rock.
16. Drop the drum over the plump fish.
17. Grip on to the plank and fling it over the wall.
18. Her brand new dress cost a lot but she was happy.
19. He hit the blunt rock with that big stick.
20. The frog slept until the dog came and bit him.
21. He swam after the fish and the shrimp.

3. The string fell from the trunk of that tree.
4. I stuck the stamp on the letter.
5. Put the strips of ribbon into the bag.
6. Can you sprint to the top of the hill and bring back a stick?
7. The quilt on the bed was very pink.
8. My family is very lucky.
9. The happy puppy went for a run and a jump.
10. We can all be very silly in the park.
11. I saw a black bird flying in the sky.
12. I must dry my top before I put it on.
13. My best hobby is playing.
14. _________ ran across the road to the shop for my mam.
15. _________ likes to soak in the bath.
16. _________ is very fast on her bike.
17. Make sure you rub your back before you get out of the bath.
18. The tadpole will grow into a frog.
19. The heat in my house was very strong.
20. Please teach me to speak and read.
21. Each of us hopes to find a seat on the beach.
22. There must be a leak in the gas pipe.

3. It is such a fine day that I think we will have a picnic.
4. I hope the smoke does not choke me.
5. The boy broke his toy plane.
6. While we were eating our dinner, I drank my milk.
7. The dog did not like to bite my leg.
8. Every time I skate on ice, I like to eat grapes.
9. The snake slid down the slope of the hill.
10. In the shade of a white tree we sat down and ate a white cake.
11. I fed the goat with a bag of oats.
12. I went to the shop and got a white loaf.
13. My nana lives on the west coast.
14. _________ read?
15. We are going to Spain for two weeks in the summer.
16. We are so happy to be home from our holidays.
17. There is a huge goldfish in the tank.
18. The peak of the hill is at the top.
19. Speak to my other friend and we will have tea.
20. There must be a gas leak in the shed.
21. The lamb was in the pond near the stream.
22. There must be a leak in the gas pipe.
Appendix IV

Write to Read Project

Dr Eithne Kennedy, St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra.

Write to Read is a St. Patrick’s College Schools Community Literacy Research Project. It has grown out of my doctoral research, a two year longitudinal study focused on investigating how the literacy achievement of children in a disadvantaged school could be raised while also enabling them to develop as life-long readers, writers and thinkers. In this paper, I will outline for you the background to the study, the various elements of the intervention and reflect on some of the reasons which contributed to its success. I will conclude by outlining the future directions of the research.

Background to the Study

This story begins some years ago with the publication of several research reports documenting the magnitude of the literacy achievement gap between children in disadvantaged communities and their more advantaged peers (Weir, 2003; Eivers et al, 2004; DES, 2005a). This body of research indicated that despite investment by government in initiatives targeted at educational disadvantage such as smaller class sizes, improved staffing and resources for disadvantaged schools that the achievement gap was as wide as ever. We also had some reviews of curriculum implementation (DES, 2005b; NCCA, 2005). At the same time Government was reviewing policy and commissioned a review of the literature on disadvantage with a view to identifying policy gaps (Archer & Weir, 2004); all of these ultimately fed into the DEIS strategy (DES, 2005c).

I was particularly struck by the research on the Evaluation of the Breaking the Cycle initiative (DES, 1996) - one of the first major initiatives targeted at disadvantaged schools- which indicated that up to 50% of children in these schools were performing at or below the 10th percentile and that children's performance declined as they moved through the school (Weir, 2003). I found these statistics quite disturbing. Given that we know quite a lot about how to teach literacy well, I wondered what the missing links were. Why were so many children underperforming? What could be done to accelerate achievement and narrow the gap? I decided to take it on as the focus for my doctoral work.

Initially, I looked to the international research base for answers and was heartened to find research on schools and teachers who had 'beaten the odds', i.e. ones that had succeeded in helping the majority of their pupils to perform well in relation to literacy, despite the demographics of the pupils attending the school. I also read widely in the literature on professional development for literacy teaching, change processes and of course recent research on effective literacy teaching.

Having looked to the international research base for answers, I sought out a school that was interested in collaborating with me to investigate how best to utilise this research base to bring about not only a real change in achievement but also a change in children’s motivation, engagement and confidence, all issues highlighted as needing attention in the Irish context and so critical to success.
The Research Design
I was lucky enough to get a Breaking the Cycle mixed junior national school to partner me in the research process. In consultation with staff we decided to start small with one class grouping, the children in First Class (56), their teachers (classroom and special education team) and parents, and if a successful model were created that it would then be expanded across the school. The study continued in the second year with the same children as they progressed into second class and the teachers remained with their class.

A key feature of the research design was the collaborative nature of the intervention. Teachers and I as researcher, adopted an investigative stance and worked together to discover solutions. Children’s achievement on standardised tests of reading (DSRT, ERC, 2002) and spelling (DPST, 2004) and their progress in writing (rating of writing samples) were tracked from baseline to end of study which allowed for an examination of their progress over time. A sample of 20 children (a mixture of high, middle and low achievers) were also interviewed at three points of the study in order to track changes in children’s motivation, engagement, agency and strategy knowledge. The effects of the change process on participating teachers’ beliefs, self-efficacy, classroom programme for literacy and their ability to sustain the change process into the future were also documented. This included the taping of the professional development sessions, interviews with teachers and classroom observations. Parental views on the intervention were also sought at the end of the study as parents were invited to participate in focus group interviews. This comprehensive set of data allowed for the examination of the range of home, school and classroom factors that can impact on and interact in relation to children’s achievement and brought together the perspectives of teachers, children and parents.

The Change Process
Our starting point was the students. We looked at a range of assessment data, both standardised test results and useful classroom examples of children’s work. We also did an audit of current classroom approaches to literacy, assessment practices, time spent on literacy and materials used. Utilising a change model (Kennedy, 2008) adapted from Loucks-Horsley et al., (2003) and Guskey (1986), changes to the instructional programme were introduced incrementally over five phases. This involved the following seven steps: (i) analysis of children’s literacy performance using formative and summative assessment data; (ii) choosing one attainable goal on which to focus attention; (iii) putting a range of supports in place to ensure the goal was met; (iv) planning how to achieve the goal; (v) teaching towards the attainment of the goal; (vi) evaluating the success of the changes made by reflecting on teaching; and (vii) benchmarking success against agreed criteria. Using the international research base, we set about designing and gradually implementing a coherent systematic effective balanced literacy framework customised to the needs of the children. While space does not permit a full exploration of all of the elements of that framework I would like to highlight a few key points.

The Shape of the Balanced Literacy Framework
A key element in the intervention is the gradual development of a 90 minute block of time for literacy, the shape of which changes according to the stage of development of the children. Of course it is not just the provision of the 90 minutes that matters. It is what happens during these 90 minutes that is important. In Write to Read the block typically includes 3 elements: a writing workshop, a reading workshop and a word work session. This block of time signals a priority and value on literacy and is needed for deep engagement and creativity to flourish. It gives children the opportunity to develop as readers, writers and thinkers.
In the reading workshop, children are in small groups and matched to texts that are just right for their instructional level and their interests. Instead of the traditional class readers whereby children might read 3 or 4 books in the year, the children in this project may read anything up to 100 books throughout the year. They are encouraged to read widely, to develop a personal taste in reading and to bring books home to share with family. While there is a balance between lower-order and higher order skills we put greater emphasis on the higher order skills. We want children to get the message that reading is about thinking about the big ideas in a text. Good readers are active: Good readers, predict, ask questions, visualise, synthesise, infer. Teachers explicitly model these strategies and this is critical in nurturing children’s independence. Children also learn with and from each other as they work collaboratively to discuss, plan, read, write and grow ideas.

In the writing workshop, children have full autonomy, choice and control over their writing. Over the year they may discover they have a talent for or an interest in a particular genre; some find they love to write fiction, others poetry or non-fiction and for some they just love to write about their day to day lives. In fact, if you were to ask any of them what their favourite part of literacy time is the response would usually be the writing workshop. The daily time element is a critical aspect. Because children know that every day they will write and that they will have autonomy in choice of topic, they invest thinking time outside of school and come to class prepared to write. We find that many children begin to write outside of school as well.

Parents were kept informed of the developments at parent teacher meetings and school briefings initially. As the project developed they were invited into the school regularly to observe classroom demonstrations of strategies by the children and to join in celebrations of children’s reading and writing. Their support for the project was an important factor.

Putting a framework such as this into operation is not easy and requires high levels of expertise on a teacher’s part, so designing an effective professional development programme was also pivotal to the success of the intervention.

**Features of the Professional Development**

A critical aspect was the fact the provision of professional development in the school for approximately two hours fortnightly which was sustained over the two years of the intervention. As noted earlier, student needs were the primary concern and drove the plan of action engaged in. Teachers had ownership of the change process from the outset and were active in shaping its direction. Therefore, the professional development was not a pre-packaged programme but was customised to needs of the school, teachers and children.

A key focus of the professional development was on sharing the current research base on literacy with the teachers. There was an emphasis put on both the theory and philosophy underpinning approaches so teachers could ‘use the research base as the grounds for their actions’ (Shulman, 1987). New strategies and approaches were introduced incrementally so that teachers did not feel overwhelmed, through provision of a range of professional readings, and DVDs, demonstration and observations.

The fortnightly sessions provided time whereby the teachers and I could support each other, share successes and challenges, reflect on teaching, debate issues and consider new goals as each target we set was met. Over the two years we gradually built the 90 minute framework for literacy outlined earlier. It was flexible enough to honour the creativity and autonomy of each teacher while also ensuring essential skills for literacy.
were taught systematically and progressively in ways that capitalised on student interests building their motivation engagement, creativity and agency.

These activities served to build the ‘relational trust’ (Hord, 2008) characteristic of school-based professional learning communities and contributed to a spirit of experimentation, risk-taking and inquiry as together, the teachers and I negotiated the change process in the reality and complexities of real classrooms and monitored the effect on children’s literacy development. All of these factors together contributed to the range of successful outcomes of the research which are the focus of the next section.

Research Outcomes

Achievement outcomes
By the end of the intervention, the participating children had statistically significantly higher achievement in reading, writing and spelling than would be expected based on their pre-test scores. The number of children performing at or below the 10th percentile on the DSRT (ERC, 2002) was reduced by three quarters, with 20% now performing above the 80th percentile (none were above this level at the outset). Similarly, writing, as assessed by the Criterion Scale (Wilson, 2002) also showed higher than expected gains, with improvements noted in overall quality, expression and spelling. There was a small cohort of children who continued to experience slow or uneven growth, even with the enhanced classroom programme and individualised support offered to them. The majority of these children had documented learning and behavioural difficulties, less stable home backgrounds, as well as problems with school attendance. The research indicates though that a high-quality literacy programme can make a real contribution to the reduction in the numbers of children requiring intervention.

Affective changes in the children
There was ample evidence from parent, children and teacher interviews and classroom observations that children were now more highly motivated and engaged in literacy activities not just in school but also outside school time:

My friends, they bring their books out and we don't play, we sit on my trampoline reading them and we read a page....we see can we solve out words. (Cheryl, student).
She actually reads her older sister asleep at night. (Parent)
Just seeing the progress so far and the kids' response to it, they are really engaged in a way I have not really seen them before (Classroom teacher).

Children had also developed their sense of self-efficacy and teachers noted that they were now more resilient in tackling challenging academic tasks:

I think that almost all of the children really gained a lot of confidence from learning how to use the different strategies. When they were given the language to talk about the strategies it gave them the confidence to talk about them and therefore actually realise they can do them. (Classroom teacher)

‘Well I think I’ve changed by I always give up when I am stuck on a word but now I use all my tools....The hardest thing I would think is when you get stuck on a word because you think oh I won’t be able to get this done but if you use all your tools then you will get it’. (Noreen, student)

These changes were also noted by parents who participated in focus group interviews at the end of the study.
Parental perspectives
Parents were of the opinion that children were engaged in reading and writing outside school in ways they had not seen prior to the intervention and this was seen as having a positive influence on the family as a whole. Parents were also aware of the instructional changes in classrooms which they felt had contributed to the changes they had observed in their children: e.g. the wide range of books for guided and independent reading, fluency techniques, vocabulary instruction leading to greater ‘word consciousness’ and the teaching of writing as a process:

I think the way Dylan is after being taught is coming down onto Mark and he is robbing his books to read. The one that is in First class is trying to out-do the one that’s in Second class! (Parent)
Now when they are getting them to do their writing they are getting them to put their thoughts down rather than the spellings being so important. Well I think that has given them the confidence to do the writing (Parent)

It is interesting to note that children did reach the national norms on a standardised test of spelling achievement (DPST, ERC, 2004) and these gains were also statistically significant.

Changes in the teachers and school
Teachers reported having higher expectations for the children and higher levels of self-efficacy and confidence in their own ability to address literacy difficulties. A more systematic, coherent, integrated and cognitively challenging curriculum was in evidence by the end of the study. The school had gradually evolved into a professional learning community as the participating teachers began to share their growing expertise with colleagues and began to expand the initiative across the school. Teachers reported that they found the whole process professionally stimulating and several enrolled on the Certificate/Diploma/Masters in Literacy at St. Patrick’s College:

So I found for me, the whole professional development, seeing and really understanding at a core concept level exactly what all the little areas of change do, so then I felt I could identify problems and know what to do... I did find the process quite exciting ...it has provided me with a huge amount of stimulation in my professional life and it has offered the experience of success you know.
For me the highlight has been the professional development and just becoming more aware of the research that is out there, how to access it, what authors to read and just the quality of the lessons, my lessons, have improved.

Working together in this dynamic way and seeing the difference it made was a very rewarding professional experience not just for teachers but also for me as a participant in the research. I would have to say it was the most important and stimulating experience of my professional career to date and is what has driven me to continue and to work with schools to grow the research.

Factors Contributing to Success
Clearly, there were many factors at work in this study. There is ‘no quick fix’ (Allington & Walmsley, 2007) to the long tail of underachievement that characterises the literacy performance of children in disadvantaged schools relative to their more affluent peers. It must be acknowledged that the positive outcomes were achieved through the interaction of a complex range of factors at the home, school and classroom level. The study demonstrates that teachers are the key to change; their expertise matters and investing in teachers is investing in systemic change. Therefore, high quality professional development matters; so too does the shape of the curriculum. At a time when there is concern about standards there is a real danger that we will have a return to a back to
basics agenda when what we really need is a research-based balanced literacy framework which allows teachers to create classrooms that develop children’s literacy skills in ways that build critical thinking and problem-solving skills but while also nurturing their imagination and creativity so that they may develop to their fullest potential. It also demonstrates that partnership is the way forward. If we work together and pool our expertise and resources, we can make a real difference. That is the future of the Write to Read project.

**Future Directions**
There are now 9 schools, in three clusters, participating in the second phase of the research which involves 124 teachers, almost 1500 children and their parents and communities. As with the initial study, continuing professional development will be at the core of Write to Read. It will adopt the successful model outlined above and teachers will again be offered the opportunity to undertake further study on the Master’s programme at St. Patrick’s College. It will build on and expand the initial research in a number of ways:

- Extend to senior classes of primary school and adopt a whole school approach from the outset in order to involve all teachers and ensure continuity across the school.
- Investigate the integration of Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the new early years framework, into an effective balanced literacy framework.
- Include a stronger parental focus from the outset, in order to support families in helping their children develop as readers and writers. We also propose to work with after-school clubs and community groups to help build their capacity to contribute to literacy development.
- Consider innovative ways of keeping children reading and writing over the summer months in order to mitigate the so called ‘summer slump’ whereby children often lose gains made over the school year during these months. We hope it will be an opportunity to involve our student teachers in volunteer work.
- Facilitate communication and professional learning among the three clusters by establishing virtual learning communities. We will develop a number of online media forums to support the dissemination and sharing of information.

It is very exciting to be expanding this research and to have the opportunity to collaborate with more schools and communities to grow the research.

**References**


Family Literacy - National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)

Preamble
The INTO and NALA meeting of 10 May 2011 identified areas of mutual interest in their submissions to the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, and discussed family literacy as a support for parents literacy development as well as children’s school performance. Research on, and resources for, family literacy were provided.

This short input provides background to the extent of literacy difficulties in Ireland, a summary of adult literacy services available, and suggests two areas for ongoing collaboration.

What is literacy?
In the past literacy was often considered to be a discrete set of skills covering the ability to read and write. Today the meaning of literacy has changed to reflect changes in society and the skills and competencies needed by individuals to participate fully in society. It involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. Literacy includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions.

The definition of literacy is also changing as the concept of ‘literacies’ becomes more widely understood. This concept recognises that people use different skills for various real-life situations, for example using a computer, reading workplace instructions or understanding a payslip. If a person needs to develop confidence and skill in particular aspects of literacy, it does not mean that they have difficulty with all the basics. Equally, if a person has a qualification, it does not always mean that they have high levels of literacy. Many adults who have not practised their literacy for a number of years lose confidence and skills.

Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change. For example, an important area that parents with literacy difficulties want to change for the better is the performance of their children in school.

Extent of literacy difficulties
The International Adult Literacy Survey in 1997 highlighted the extent of literacy difficulties among Irish adults. According to the survey, one in four Irish adults has a significant literacy difficulty. This compares with 3% in Sweden and 5% in Germany. To date, this remains the most up-to-date information on adult literacy levels in Ireland. Standards among Irish 15-year-olds in school showed a significant decline in literacy and mathematics in the latest OECD (PISA) results. Reading ability of Irish 15-year-olds ranks in 17th place out of 39 countries, compared to 5th place in 2000, while

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Ireland is below the OECD average in mathematics. These young people will be adults next year.  

Most adults with literacy difficulties can read something but find it hard to understand official forms or deal with modern technology. Some will have left school confident about their numeracy and reading skills but find that changes in their workplace and everyday life make their skills inadequate. According to the CSO, there are currently 388,600 (19%) people in the labour force with less than a level 4 qualification, of which 6% have primary level or no qualifications.

**PIAAC - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies**

The OECD is currently undertaking a new international survey called PIAAC. The survey will publish results in 2013. As well as providing up to date analysis of adult competencies and literacy levels, the survey will allow Ireland to measure progress in national literacy levels and to compare progress to other participating countries.

**What is the impact of having a literacy difficulty?**

People with literacy difficulties are at greater risk of unemployment and social exclusion. Having a literacy difficulty often means a person is not able to understand health and safety information, how Government organisations work, go for promotion, complete a driver theory exam or vote. Equally, parents who have literacy difficulties may be unable to support their own children with their school work, reading and writing. Currently in Ireland up to 30% of children from disadvantaged areas leave primary school with literacy difficulties.

We know that people with literacy and numeracy difficulties are less likely to participate in education and training. It is acknowledged that ‘better educated employees are much more likely to partake in education/training (15% of third-level graduates compared to 4% of those with a Junior Certificate).’ This situation compounds the Matthew effect whereby people who need the most assistance are the least likely to be assisted while those who need the least assistance are the most likely to be assisted.

**Family Literacy**

The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People (July 2011) recognises the significant impact of parental support for young children to their literacy and numeracy development and that it can mitigate the negative effects of low socio-economic status or low parental educational attainment. The plan requires schools to ‘ensure that parental engagement in children’s learning is integrated into each school’s School Improvement Plan’. This covers the objective that schools should provide or host sensitively designed opportunities for parents to develop their confidence and their capacity to help their children at home in relation to literacy and numeracy.

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9 Since 2011, the PIACC Survey has been published and the results of PISA 2012 reflect Ireland’s performances in 2000, 2003 and 2006.

10 CSO website: http://www.cso.ie/qnhs/calendar_quarters_qnhs.htm Table S9a, Q. 1, 2011

11 Department of Education and Skills (2011), National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People


15 Department of Education and Skills (2011), National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People page 22

16 Ibid,
Promoting parental involvement and family literacy is an integral part of the national strategy for the development literacy in schools to 2020. NALA will work in partnership with unions, schools and other stakeholders to support the development of appropriate family literacy interventions for parents and families of school going children.

**Adult Literacy Services**

Currently in Ireland there are over 50,000 adults attending literacy tuition provided by the 33 VEC Adult Literacy Services (ALS) in 130 centres throughout the country. Adult literacy provision includes small group courses with professional tutors, and also includes one-to-one tutoring (by volunteers). There are a range of programmes aimed at different target groups running in each VEC ALS including family literacy, ESOL, Skills for Work and Return to learning (both workplace literacy initiatives) and Return to education (6 hour course for Community Employment participants).

Each VEC ALS is managed by an Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) who delivers tutor training and manages the paid and voluntary tutors. The ALS is under the general supervision of the Adult Education Officer (AEO).

Other educational programmes with a literacy dimension run by the VECs include full time and part-time programmes funded under the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and Youthreach.

FÁS are increasingly integrating literacy into their programmes, for example in the Community Training Centres. Other stakeholders, such as Skillnets and trade unions, provide literacy development as part of their training programmes. The VECs have now been amalgamated to form the Education and Training Boards. Solas has taken over the role of FÁS.

Annex 1 below provides a chart of adult literacy services.

**Proposed actions**

1. The INTO develop a formal position / policy statement on adult literacy.

2. The INTO and NALA work in partnership to support the implementation of the *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People* (July 2011), and specifically to collaborate to support national schools to:
   - develop school improvement plans to engage parents; and
   - provide opportunities for parents to develop their capacity to help their children at home in relation to literacy and numeracy.

NALA can provide inputs or supports as required.
Annex 1: Adult Literacy Provision in Ireland

**Funder**

**Provider**

**Programme**

* Back to Education Initiative
* VTOS
* Youthreach
* Community Education
* Adult Literacy

**Level 4**

Post Leaving Certificate

Adult Education

**NALA’s Distance Learning Service**

**FÁS**

Employment Services

**Skillnets**

**In 2009 36% of those attending adult literacy tuition were in work.**

**Literacy options: (participation figures 2009)**
- Mainstream: 1:1 and/or small groups - 35,614
- Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) - 2,325 in 2008
- ESOL— 9,551
- Family—3,396
- FÁS Community Employment Return to Education programme - 1,620

**Workplace learning including:**
- Return to Learning in the Local Authorities– 1,735
- Workplace Basic Education Fund / Skills for Work - 1,585

**Employment Services**

**Community Training Centres**

**Training Services**

**Workplace Basic Education Fund (WBEF)**

**Department of Education and Skills (DES)**

**Note:** Integration of adult literacy and numeracy is beginning to purposefully happen across VEC programmes and within FÁS Community Training Centres only. There is no purposeful integration in workplace learning yet.

**2011**
Part 2

Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education

November 2011

Athlone
Opening Speeches and Presentations

Noreen Flynn, INTO President, officially opened the Consultative Conference.

Milo Walsh, Cathaoirleach, Education Committee.

On behalf of the Education Committee I would like to add to the President’s welcome to you all to the 2011 Consultative Conference on Education – ‘Literacy in a Changing World’.

While one of the objectives of this Education Conference is to inform and direct INTO education policy it’s rewarding to know that discussion and participation at the INTO Education Conference can have a wide influence. The reformed Ethiopian Teachers’ Association organised an education conference for its members last May inspired by the attendance of their President, Mr Benti, at our own Education Conference last year in Cork on the theme of Learning Communities.

The Education Committee members worked very hard over the last year and have produced a comprehensive document that I am sure will aid you in your discussions.

I entered the education profession in the early-seventies - it was an exciting time as it coincided with the introduction of the then new curriculum (1971) - those of you of my vintage will no doubt remember the two orange books.

When I read Brian Mac Mahon’s ‘Windows of Wonder’ for the first time many years ago it reminded me of the near evangelical enthusiasm for the introduction of the new methodologies among the 70’s NQTs. I would like to read you a small piece. I’m sure many of you will know the short story.

This seventies curriculum was the first attempt to place the child at the core of teaching and learning and has led us to the revised curriculum we have now ... A curriculum that has had a large teacher input ... a curriculum that has been copied by other countries...... that is still child centred......and a curriculum that I believe is under great pressure.

Yes, teachers have experienced challenges in relation to implementing the curriculum, and some revision is essential. But we must not let the findings of ONE Pisa report or ONE report from the inspectorate based on incidental visits to schools dictate our response to curriculum change. PISA 2009 showed that Ireland’s ranking dropped from 5th to 17th in the Literacy league table for 15 year olds. Our ranking may have dropped significantly but there is no evidence that standards have dropped to such an extent. According to experts from Statistics Canada and the Educational Research Centre in Drumcondra it is difficult to be certain that there is an underlying real decline in standards over time without further evidence. Indeed the available evidence shows stable standards over time in literacy and maths in Irish schools, so it is not possible to conclude definitively that standards in literacy and numeracy have fallen in Ireland.
Nevertheless the Minister decided to take a pro-active approach to improving standards in literacy and numeracy – in case there had been some decline. So now we have a National Strategy to improve literacy and numeracy published last July.

Thankfully there is no suggestion in the strategy about reducing the time for the Arts to allow more time to be spent on literacy and numeracy. Nevertheless we will see changes to our curriculum over time. Through our representation on NCCA we will be involved in this process. The INTO Education Committee will take an active role in this process of consultation.

It was heartening to hear Alan Wall from the Department of Education speaking at the recent Teaching Council Conference stating that ‘Improvements in Literacy and Numeracy should be achieved within the delivery of a broad and balanced Curriculum’.

I believe this education conference to be among the most important in recent years. Our curriculum is under scrutiny. There are severe pressures being put on teachers which could almost lead them to “teach to the test”. There seems to be an attitude prevailing that the solution to literacy and numeracy problems in disadvantaged areas is to introduce another programme - never mind what country it comes from or how much it costs. Assessment tools being used are largely culturally inappropriate for schools in disadvantaged areas.

Increasingly it would appear that schools are being denied the opportunity to mediate the curriculum as they see fit for the children in their care thus not allowing teachers to exercise their professional judgement. Yet, according to the OECD, in countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better.

As a trade union and as educationalists I believe we must defend three main things:

• A broad-based child-centred curriculum;
• The autonomy of individual school learning communities to mediate the curriculum to suit its context;
• And last but not least – we must defend our teachers - our greatest asset.

I would like to leave you with a quote from Professor Christopher Day from the University of Nottingham as to why teachers matter

They matter to the education and achievement of their students and, more and more, to their personal and social well-being. No educational reform has achieved success without teachers committing themselves to it; no school has improved without the commitment of teachers; and although some students learn despite their teachers, most learn because of them – not just because of what and how they teach, but, because of who they are as people.

Bainígí taitneamh agus tairbhe as an gComhdháil.
Introduction to Literacy in a Changing World

Áine Dillon, Education Committee

Dia daoibh agus fáilte a chairde go léir.

Having taken the decision to dedicate the 2011 Education Conference to Literacy, the Education Committee began working on their brief over a year ago. Little did we know then how topical our decision would become. In the past year literacy and numeracy, in schools and in society in general, have been put under the spotlight. We have had the results of the PISA tests on 15 year olds splashed across the media and scrutinised by all and sundry. As a result of this, and other factors, we have had the publication of the document *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* by the DES. Much of this scrutiny has focused on the role of teachers and schools and some of the conclusions have not always been fair. While we as a profession and a union always welcome discussion and debate, it is important that all sides of the argument are heard.

As a nation we still achieve high levels of literacy. Despite having one of the largest class sizes in the OECD the standards of literacy in our primary schools have not fallen in recent years. In spite of the fact that we have fallen in ranking in the PISA tests for 15 year olds the scores are still at the OECD average. These same Irish teenagers scored above average at reading digital and online texts. We have one of the highest rates of school retention in the OECD. In a changing world and working in under-resourced schools, primary teachers are always ready to meet the challenges of new methodologies and new literacies.

The Conference document, which you received prior to coming here this weekend, outlines in a positive way the great work that is being done in primary schools throughout this country. It is a discussion and a celebration of that work. I will now give a brief overview of what is contained in the document.

The Education Committee looked at the definition of literacy in the 21st Century and placed literacy in the context of Irish primary education. There is no doubt that literacy no longer means simply the ability to read and write. It is now considered a multi-dimensional process, encompassing reading, writing, comprehending and reflecting on various forms of communication, including the written word, the spoken word and digital literacies. We can also define literacy in terms of levels. We speak of functional literacy or more developed literacy. We discuss the various social and cultural influences that can determine the levels of literacy achieved by a person.

The revised 1999 Curriculum committed to providing a high quality education with an emphasis on numeracy and literacy. The provision of inservice training and continuing professional development, particularly in disadvantaged schools, are proof of that commitment by the DES. The up-take and interest shown by primary teachers to develop their own knowledge and skills, enhanced and enriched the work already taking place in the classroom. Two reviews carried out by the NCCA and the DES on the implementation of the English Curriculum in the past six to seven years reported many positive results. While acknowledging that English was well taught in the majority of lessons inspected (over 85%), much was made, especially in the media, of the unsatisfactory percentages. This and other assessments and indeed, what might be interpreted as public pressure, led to the *Draft Plan to improve Numeracy and Literacy in Schools*.

The Draft Plan was published in November 2010. Again, the high standards of Irish Education and literacy attainments were acknowledged and lauded. However, the cry that ‘good is no longer good enough’ set the tone of the document. As you are aware, following
widespread consultation and robust discussion among its members, the INTO compiled a submission to the document. The general overarching comment of the INTO was that of concern with what was considered a 'simplistic and technical view of education rather than recognising that education is a complex non-linear process'. The INTO also asserted its commitment to ensuring that all children leave primary school with adequate numeracy and literacy skills, its support for the continuing professional development of teachers and the empowerment of parents to be the primary educators of their children.

The final publication of Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People was greeted with much attention from the media. From the point of view of the INTO it was an improvement on the Draft policy. References to assessment, which littered the original draft, were reduced and there is an acknowledgment of the two literacy background of children attending Irish primary schools. Both of these concerns had been highlighted by the INTO. The influences on literacy attainments, referred to earlier on, are well documented in the chapter headed Influences on Literacy Achievement. The areas of home, community, early years, quality of teaching, school leadership, gender, bilingualism and English as an additional language are all examined and make for compelling reading.

In our document the influence of disadvantage is examined in more detail, as it is widely believed that levels of disadvantage in the home and in the environment are perhaps the greatest hindrances to a child’s literacy achievement. Some social policies and initiatives introduced over the last three or four decades are examined. Action research carried out by Eithne Kennedy, who will speak at this Conference, is referred to. I would draw your attention in particular to the document’s appendices. There are three reports on projects which have been successfully implemented in DEIS schools, but which could be adapted for any school, disadvantaged or otherwise.

Appendix one is a description of a project on parental involvement. Springing from a belief that the lack of parental engagement in the child’s schooling and education impacts negatively on academic achievement led one teacher to build relationships with parents and encourage them to become actively involved in school life. The involvement of these parents informally, in in-school workshops, on educational trips and co-teaching had dramatic effects on their children’s literacy and numeracy attainments.

Appendix two is an examination of a Home-School Reading Project. The parents of junior infant children were invited to participate in a programme of reading with their children. Again, informal relationships with parents were developed and they were then invited to a coffee and information meeting to explain the programme to them. You will find a sample letter to parents and the aims of the programme in the appendix.

Appendix three is a description of a Successful Literacy Power Hour which takes place in an Urban DEIS School. The rationale, the background and practical elements of the lay-out and procedure are included.

You will notice that what these successful projects have in common is that they were all devised at school level. They are not programmes bought in by the DES and implemented in schools with little or no staff input. These programmes were conceived in staff rooms resulting from an identified need within the school. Like the initiative introduced by Eithne Kennedy, also described in this document, school staffs were at the heart of devising and implementing all of these successful strategies.

The chapter on special education needs gives a comprehensive overview of the education context of children with special needs in 21st Century Ireland. It highlights the fact that in recent years the placements for these children and the way in which they are educated have
changed radically. Children with special needs are educated in a more inclusive way within Mainstream schools and while there is still a need for Special Schools, the fact that there has been a shift in the educational landscape for these children has made all teachers look at special needs in a different way. The literacy challenges for children with special needs are examined in this chapter and there is a discussion on the resources and professional development available for teachers.

The piece in our document on Northern Ireland gives much food for thought. Initiatives implemented by our nearest neighbours are very often adopted by our jurisdiction based on little more evidence than on an ‘if it’s good enough for them it’s good enough for us’ basis. But we do know that one size does not fit all and it is very important that we examine closely which initiatives have succeeded and in particular learn from those that have failed. The overuse of assessments and the endless hours spent on paperwork by our colleagues in Northern Ireland have not improved literacy results there. Would it be any different here?

This Education Conference is a Consultative one. We hope that each one of you leaves tomorrow happy that your voice has been heard and that you return to your classrooms and staffrooms reinvigorated and inspired by what you have heard this weekend.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh.
Results of INTO Questionnaire on Literacy – Spring 2011

Martin Lynch, Education Committee

Last Spring, as part of our preparation for this conference, the Education Committee drafted a questionnaire on literacy and related elements of school life. This was then distributed, through Head Office, to a randomly selected cohort of 1,000 teachers. The results of this questionnaire are included in the Conference Discussion Document, and were compiled by Breda Fay, EDC Representative from District 7.

I would like, here, to highlight, and draw your attention to, certain aspects of these results that throw some light on current practices and thinking in schools, particularly when viewed through the clearing lens of the National Strategy on Literacy and Numeracy.

Classroom Practice
The first point of note, coming under ‘Classroom Practice’, indicates that one-third of the schools represented currently have members of staff with Posts of Responsibility that include curricular responsibility for English, maths and Irish. This is, naturally, set to drop significantly in the near future, as more senior teachers with Positions of Responsibility retire and their posts cease to exist.

It is also worth noting, that, according to the results of the survey, 83% of teachers were allocating discrete time to the teaching of oral language and 90% agreed that discretionary time should be retained – with a minimum of two hours deemed appropriate in most cases. This finding is of some significance, particularly given the debate on sourcing the extra time needed for Literacy and Numeracy in the National Strategy.

Assessment
Given that Gerry Mac Ruairc will address this conference on National Assessment Policy and Standardised Testing in Schools, some of the following questionnaire results on the area of Assessments should be of interest.

When questioned on their use of Assessment for Learning, 70% of respondents claimed to have used AFL in both English and maths in the last school year, while 40% had used it to evaluate Irish.

Most standardised testing takes place in May of each year and 30% of the results are reported to parents orally, 23% in written form and 22% using a combination of both. 56% of the teachers surveyed use the STen format to report results, while 24% prefer to deliver percentiles, with 12% opting for standard scores. In 76% of schools, standardised tests’ results are discussed at staff meetings and analysed at whole school level.

When it comes to pupils’ self-evaluation of their work, more that 50% of teachers surveyed claimed to use such popular methods as ‘Traffic Lights’, ‘2 Stars and a Wish’ and ‘Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down’. Other methods include speed drills and quizzes in maths and encouraging students to compare current and past work to evaluate progress and then select their ‘best work’ to keep in a portfolio, while 70% of teachers reported keeping samples of students’ work in English, 60% in maths and 42% in Irish. Over half of those surveyed involved their students in discussion about their progress in English and maths with one third doing so in Irish.
Materials/Resources

Availability of Reading Materials: ‘Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life’ emphasises the relationship between literacy levels and the availability of reading materials. 96% of those surveyed had a class library, 41% had a school library and 77% of teachers had access to their local library.

Workbooks: It also appears, from the survey, that a significant number of teachers use workbooks as a teaching resource – just over 80% in English and maths, with 64% using workbooks in Irish.

ICT: 80% of those surveyed considered ICT, a useful or very useful tool, with 75% using it on a weekly basis in English, 70% using it on a weekly basis in maths and 50%, in Irish.

Homework

Probably the single, most noteworthy, detail from the ‘Homework’ section of the questionnaire is that it is viewed as either ‘Valuable’ or ‘Very valuable’ for pupils’ learning, by 80% of those surveyed.

LS/RT

While the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy places more and more emphasis on in-class support, the survey reveals that 90% of those who responded had children withdrawn in small groups and 50% stated that they had in-class support for their students. From the survey, it also appears that the criteria for receipt of learning support is very often at variance with those outlined in the Learning Support Guidelines.

CPD

Compared with surveys that tend to limit CPD to attendance at traditional courses, this survey took a much broader interpretation of CPD and included such activities as postgraduate studies, work with cuiditheoirí in own classroom, professional debate with colleagues in school and interaction with other teachers at seminars / conferences. All rated their experiences in CPD over the previous 3 years very positively, while, in particular, those who had engaged in Post Grad. Studies and professional debate with colleagues in school, reported having been totally satisfied with their experiences. When it came to suggesting topics of interest for future CPD, the top three selected were similar amongst all teachers and those teaching at Infant Level. These were:

1. Teaching children with difficulties in maths.
2. Literacy difficulties in English.
3. Challenging high achievers.

Among those surveyed teaching in DEIS schools, the top suggestion for future CPD was English oral language.

Enhancing Literacy and Numeracy Achievement

Those surveyed were asked to suggest changes in their schools and in the wider system which would enhance Literacy and Numeracy. Among those suggestions were the following:

- The majority identified an overloaded (‘crowded’?) curriculum as ‘problematic’....less quantity and more quality;
- A skills-based curriculum that was both challenging and relevant;
- Early screening and intervention in the development of Numeracy and Literacy;
- Increased in-class support;
- More time allocation for Literacy and Numeracy instruction.
National Assessment Policy and Standardised Testing in Schools: Some issues to consider

Gerry Mac Ruairc, UCD

Introduction

Today for me is probably what playing in Croke Park is like for Westlife - it’s the home crowd and it is really special to be here. I am also aware that the home crowd can also be the most difficult. My main focus here today is to explore the use of standardised tests and it is great to have the opportunity to talk about this as it is something that I feel very strongly about. It is also an area I was led to by children themselves while I was doing research on language variation. My interest and subsequent research on the area stems from students’ perspectives and their experiences of standardised testing. This has strongly influenced the stance that I have taken. The perspective I will outline is also supported and influenced by a range of scholarship internationally, particularly those who look at education from a critical perspective.

While most of my paper today will be quite critical it is not meant to be negative - but thought provoking in order to contribute to a discussion and to give an airing to some of the contested issues relating to standardised testing. Many of these you will be familiar with but today will be an opportunity to draw them together in a focused way. It is important for me to state at the outset that it is very difficult for me to talk about standardised testing without maintaining a strong focus on disadvantaged schools, so I apologise to those people who aren’t working in DEIS schools in advance. It is widely recognised that the impact of standardised testing in disadvantaged schools is more problematic and holds far more negative implications than is the case in a non-disadvantaged/ non-DEIS context. So I am asking for your understanding in relation to my slant on this issue.

The bigger picture

By way of providing a broad context for this presentation I would like to draw attention to a number of core issues or discourses that need to be kept in mind when the issue of standardised testing in schools is considered. The first relates to the legacy and continuing impact of the prevailing neo-liberal agenda with its associated models of high-stakes accountability. This perspective currently frames much of the discussion in relation to education – a context which some suggest has led to a fabrication of quality17. It is vital in my view to position standardised testing firmly within this context and while it has existed for a long time, the recent intensity of interest in the outcomes of testing has changed the ground rules considerably18. The second issue I will deal with relates to the standardised testing process and the test itself as a measurement of attainment. I am specifically focusing on some limitations of testing because I think many of the positive points are already well rehearsed elsewhere. Following this, I will look at the bias in testing. They used to talk about this many years ago and just because we don’t really talk about it as much as we did, doesn’t mean that it has gone away. Finally, I will offer some views in relation to alternative models of capturing the work of schools. I am not trying to offer myself as a salvation to all as I don’t have that kind of expertise, in fact I think the expertise might be in the room with us. What I would like to do is to suggest some pointers to bring into the discussion in classrooms and

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staffrooms that might resonate with you and provide some food for thought as you engage
with developments in this domain of school practice.

There are a number of trends and assumptions underpinning the reinvigorated focus on
testing that need to be explored. The first of these relates to the notion out there that
increased testing will lead to improved attainment\(^{19}\). This is highly contested but still retains
its legitimacy as an imperative for a greater role for regimes of testing and is very popular
particularly among policy makers in numerous countries. The second issue here is the
increasing focus on data measurement and the production of numeric values that measure
the outcomes of education. The influence of these neoliberal or quasi-market approaches as
well as the strong rise in the new public management approach or post-welfare mode of
governance has emphasised the need for data about the workings of public/state sectors and
particularly that of education because this is one of its biggest areas and one of the biggest
draws on the public purse\(^{20}\). This has led to an increasing view that education is a valid part
of a competitive and comparative market driven area of growth where comparative analysis
within and between systems is now a defining feature of the policy platform. There are three
main players at the moment that relate to education; PISA, PIRLS and TIMMS and many of
you are already familiar with these. The impact of the outcome of these large-scale
assessments is considerable. After the PISA 2000 results were published, the eastern part of
Germany went into a tailspin because they ranked so poorly\(^{21}\) and we are engaging in a
reactive response to our drop in rank in the form of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. The
success of Finland on PISA for example has contributed to a significant rise in what could be
described as educational tourism. The third point for consideration here is derived from the
whole notion of globalisation and the centrality of the knowledge economy in ensuring future
growth. The increasing economisation of education policy\(^{22}\) and the dominance of economic
imperatives in driving education has resulted in a strong view emerging among powerful and
influential stakeholders that the only valid outcome of education is its economic benefit –
there is no need to elaborate on how narrow and poten-
tially limiting this focus is.

A final point to consider here is the cumulative effect of all of these perspectives on the
education landscape where interest in the education sector and its outcomes is intensifying
and where increasingly policy makers are having a much more direct influence on practice.
The notion that policy-makers know best should be contested. The fact that sometimes these
policy people base their knowledge on undeclared sources is quite problematic. I refer in
particular to both the draft literacy and numeracy strategy and the final document. These
documents regularly refer to research to support claims made but never specify what
research/which studies/whose perspectives are cited. There is a need to actually say what
research studies are used. It is good practice and fundamental to real critical engagement – if
that is what is being sought and I suspect that that precisely is what is not intended. On the
basis of these, often undeclared, sources we engage in what Helen Gunter calls a process of
epistemological transfer of programmes, initiatives and teaching packs. These imports are
implemented in schools as part of national policy, often in a highly uncritical way. This
notion of ‘bring this in’ and ‘try this’ and ‘one size fits all’ policy borrowing prevails.

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The use of standardised testing in Irish schools

It is worth exploring how the use of standardised tests developed in Ireland in order to situate where we have got to now in a historical context. When I started teaching in Tallaght in the 1980s we administered standardised testing in our school. In general, it was a low-key event and the results only informed part of the work we did. Practice in schools varied; some administered tests and some didn’t. There were no additional imperatives driving testing, nobody was forced to do it. I think it was circular 08/99 in relation to special education where the link between standardised test results and resources became very firmly established. This provided an increasing currency for standardised tests in schools and in the system generally. Many schools that weren’t testing certainly started testing after this point. The discussion shifted and from then on learning support teachers, resource teachers, the workings of the common allocation model all began to pivot on test results. Around the same time test results increasingly became part of the evidence base for tuairisci scoile and WSE and this emphasis has increased over time. Then over three years ago the policy on mandatory testing in 1st/2nd and 4th/5th and reporting to parents began. This is something I will return to later. And now we have the most recent development which involves the collation of these results at a national level as recommended in the National Literacy Strategy. As I was writing this up on Monday I said to myself ‘what’s next?’ That question was answered very explicitly the very next day with the release of circular 56/2011 which has now clearly positioned Ireland on the high stakes testing platform.

So now Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life have added an additional point of testing – from now on children will be tested in 2nd, 4th and 6th. The circular states ‘you are requested to ensure that standardised testing is implemented in your school on an annual basis in the relevant classes beginning May/June 2012’ to which I have added in order to facilitate valid comparisons between schools and types of schools. While this is only my opinion it is not implausible – if schools could test as they did before at different times of the year comparative analysis would be neither valid nor reliable. On a positive note it is very clearly stated that we won’t end up with league tables and I hope this is the case, however the situation that will prevail from 2012 onwards will facilitate comparisons – how this information will be used we simply don’t know. The circular also marks another shift in policy; a principal teacher will be required to report annually, aggregated assessment data from standardised tests to the board of management of their school – that is quite a significant shift in practice and quite a significant change in the relationship between the principal and the board of management. It is not clear whether this will have a positive or a negative impact. We will just have to wait and see how this practice is implemented in schools and how it is managed at a local level. I would be concerned purely because each of these changes adds legitimacy to a contested form of assessment and in disadvantaged schools in particular this may not serve school communities well.

Challenging the orthodoxy of testing

A number of years ago I read this quote and I have used it frequently because this is the core of my message ‘Tests should be used like dangerous drugs – handle with care’! No matter what I say here today or what happens with this new policy in relation to testing the evidence from the past and from all the controversy surrounding assessment of this kind strongly points to the fact that tests still retain a dominant position in terms of their assumed objectivity and they enjoy enormous support and trust on the part of the public and

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23 Mac Ruairc, G (2009) ”Dip, dip sky blue, who’s it? NOT YOU: Children's experiences of standardised testing: A socio-cultural analysis', Irish Educational Studies, 28 (1)
There are a number of perspectives that challenge the orthodoxy that has developed around testing. Many of these arguments are often silent and regularly marginalised and I am just going to explore a few of them here today. Standardised testing is a contested terrain whether we like it or not or whether the policy makers like it or not. The patterns of results in terms of the groups who do well and those who do badly are well known - I am not so sure how many more times we need to find out the same information. Also we really need to address - unless we are going to be in the same place again in a few years time – we need to critically interrogate the language ideologies underpinning curriculum, textbooks and pedagogy. As part of this discussion we need to fully engage with notions of language, culture and the idea of subtractive schooling – where certain groups of children (many of whom do poorly on tests) have to leave behind their language register and the cultural worlds they are most familiar with in order to engage with school and certainly in order to engage successfully with testing of the standardised kind.

Evidence strongly points to a range of negative consequences for the quality of schools, that linked to high stakes testing regimes. Many of these are well rehearsed and some include a 'teach to the test' culture in schools or a 'teach the test' model that sometimes happens. Evidence from other system points to a narrowing of the curriculum – think about this in relation to the recommended extra time for literacy and numeracy- what this has led to in the UK for example is what has been termed an impoverished curriculum by the Cambridge Review of Primary Education (see note 11) which was conducted in the UK recently. Interestingly in terms of a previous point in relation to policy makers’ selection of evidence – this very robust study was negated almost in its entirety by the last Blair government in the UK. It simply wasn’t true because they said it wasn’t true.

In addition to this if one looks at some of the literature in relation to disadvantaged schools; these schools have difficulty performing well on tests in general but the problems with higher attainment are exacerbated in cases where schools are really trying things differently, where they have innovative cultures in relation to curriculum content and pedagogy, where they

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experiment with ideas, are not afraid of failure, and where they really engage with the reality of students’ lives.\cite{Stobart}

There is another aspect of the way testing develops in schools that is important to note. What I am referring to here is the impact that the outcome of testing has on teachers’ own view of effective teaching and what teachers feel good teaching is. I would be very concerned that teachers would begin to view themselves and their effectiveness on the basis of student outcomes on tests. One small-scale study carried out in UCD last year indicated that 43% of the teachers already speak of a high correlation between test results and their perceptions of effectiveness.\cite{Rogerson} One of the reasons that I am concerned about this is that about three years ago myself, Dympna Devine, Judith Harford and other colleagues in UCD did a study on teachers’ views of effective models of practice. Very strong messages emerged from this study in relation to what is perceived to be effective. Teachers spoke of strong values, being a reflective practitioner, effective planning and management, the formative, social and moral dimension of the work. One factor emerged very strongly from this i.e. teacher’s love of children, their interest in developing young people and a passion for teaching\cite{Devine}. It is really important that these are not negated in anything that happens down the line in relation to how teachers begin to view themselves as professionals and the way teachers subjectify who they are.

I would like to focus now on the recent policy in relation to the communication of test results to parents. I see a lot of difficulty with this policy particularly in DEIS schools. It is not that I am anti-information, I’m not, I just think that in particular when looking at disadvantage schools there is something that we need to think about here and arguably this wasn’t considered before we actually went down this line – I don’t think all information is necessarily good information or that all information is necessary information. To illustrate what I am saying I am just going to imagine a conversation in a block of flats in a working class area after a parent teacher meeting where the results of the standardised test were communicated to the parents. The question I am posing is of what positive value is this kind of a conversation?

- You have a 2 in reading
- It’s not too good just a 1 in reading
- Not sure what it means but she says you have some kind of a STEN score of 3 in reading, it’s not that good
- She said our Amy has only a 2 out of 10 in reading
- She got 6 out of 10 that’s the top of the class and that’s not that good
- She got a 2 in reading
- I thought she was great at reading but she only got a 1 out of 10 in reading

**Bias in testing**

A key issue to consider when exploring how standardised tests function is the idea of bias in testing. Despite considerable scholarship on bias in testing going right back to when I was in college (a long time ago) there is a significant level of a ‘denial of bias’ among policy makers and others with respect to standardised tests. Broadly speaking bias can occur in a number of different ways, the test design, the language of the test, the administration of the test, the

\cite{Stobart, Rogerson, Devine}
completion of the test by students, the correction of the test etc. I’m going to delve a bit deeper into the manner in which the test is administered and in a related way to language, the manner in which the test is completed by children and the language register of the test from the perspective of the student.

**Administering the test**

It might surprise you to learn that there is a phenomenon called ‘test score pollution practices’ that can be identified in how teachers administer tests. The findings here are based on a study completed last year in UCD by Rogerson 2011. One hundred and sixty primary school teachers completed the questionnaire, 17.5% were male and 82.5% were female and that gives you an idea of the sample of the study, quite a small study but none-the-less reasonably large for this kind of work. A number of key findings are worth noting and the response to these key statements give a sense of what is to follow:

- I’m aware of other teachers engaging in non-standard practice to raise the scores their classes achieve. There was 40% agreement with that statement.
- Some teachers’ practices around standardised test administration and correction are a cause of concern for you. 30% agreed with this

The aim of the exercise is not to provide a master class in how to test pollute but these are just some of the issues that were brought up in the study. If you look at the graph you will see the nature and degree of pollution of the testing processes.

The main cause of concern here is that as the stakes go up there is going to be a pressure to increase that kind of activity – it is just something we need to think about. If we corrupt the testing process to such an extent that the results are no longer valid then what is the point in doing them other than to feed into the testing culture. And if there are truth claims about increasing level of attainment in the future we need to be clear - we are not comparing like with like and this challenges a fundamental construct underpinning this type of testing.

Table 1: Actions carried out by yourself or that you are aware other teachers have carried out in relation to standardised testing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Other Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gave an answer to a student</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowed extra time for test completion</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged students to redo/check an answer</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the time leading up to testing taught topics knowing that such would be examined in the test</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explained vocabulary from the English test paper</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noted common errors made by teachers to inform future teaching</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught items from the test</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followed all time and administration instructions exactly</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left materials on view knowing that such materials would aid students in the test</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Bias in test completion: The language factor**
There is bias in relation to the strategies children use when completing the test and many of them you would already know very well. Let us take the vocabulary component of the Drumcondra test as an example. The test response strategy that is most accurate in terms of testing children’s vocabulary is if children use a means the same as/is the correct word for type of approach. In this case children pick the key word from the four possible options A B C or D. This does not happen all of the time and consequently sometimes children guess! They do this in different ways; either straight forward guessing, a type of 50/50 selection or an eenie meanie minie moe/ dip dip sky blue approach. The most problematic of all strategies and one that really illustrates the issue of language difference between children is when they use the ‘it makes sense’ approach. With this strategy children try to locate the contexts for the key word in their existing linguistic repertoire/experience. This is where you see the divide between middle classes and many of their disadvantaged peers. There are stark differences between socio-economic groups in the use of this approach. For the working class children there is often little by way of a familiar context for much of the language in the test. As a result of this children present with fundamental misunderstandings about the meaning of words as a direct result of the particular context in which the child has heard or had previously experienced the word or part of the word. I have two examples here from the Drumcondra tests (the previous version).

**Are dogs domestic animals?**

*Four options: one right answer and 3 distractors:*
foreign/ friendly/ tame/ sensible

Shelly: I picked friendly because domestic means clean and from Domestos, the bleach and clean … that’s good and so is friendly.

And I’m sure if we went around the room we would have plenty of examples of that kind of thing.

**They were unable to subdue him,**

Quieten /rescue/assist/replace

When this was being discussed the children (those who managed to read the item) put each of the four words into the sentence and because there was no sense - all of the words made sense and you can see what he is doing here.

Jack   I put rescue ‘cause I thought subdue meant to like get him back.

Peter I thought he was stuck down the hole and you get him back.

Jack   To subdue him back to your gang – yeah that’s it.

By contrast middle class children indicated their level of resonance with the linguistic repertoire of the test with statements including:

*I don’t need to go through them I know what it means – it is actually what it means. This is the right answer, you read it in books you see it in a lot of places; you hear it around the place.*
The level of resonance between the language used in test items and the middle-class linguistic repertoire means that the middle-class student is in a notably privileged position in terms of the potential for higher levels of attainment on the test. This high level of linguistic resonance permeates the whole test experience for the middle-class child, with the result that each of the strategies used, including simple guessing, have a great likelihood of success. The testing experience for the working-class child on the other hand, is characterised by varying degrees of struggle with the linguistic challenges that the tests present. Only one dimension of the linguistic heterogeneity is tested. There are lots of different registers out there. They are arguably lots of different registers but only one is looked at - that school type language. What we are actually doing is validating the dominant linguistic register and rewarding those who are immersed in this register for their success in acquiring literacy of their own linguistic world.\textsuperscript{33} There are deeply problematic implications here for disadvantaged schools.

In all cases I would argue that, whether in DEIS schools or otherwise, the focus of standardised tests is too narrow. Prioritising standardised testing scores is not capturing the kind of work that is going on in schools and you know that a lot better than I do. However, their simplicity, presumed ‘objectivity’, the ‘validity’ of comparisons that they give rise to, mean that they are a formidable force to be reckoned with whether we like it or not.

**Going forward?**

So what do we do? In my view, we need a systematic, reliable approach to capturing the work of the school across all dimensions of literacy practice. And that does not mean going to the English checklist model – that is not what I am talking about. Anecdotal is not enough. I would have experience of the high levels of anecdotal evidence out there in schools at the moment from talking to people in disadvantaged schools. They regularly say ‘well the test results aren’t good but ours are better than that’. They know because they know and they may be be right - they usually are in fact. However we live in a world where that simply is not enough. We need to set the agenda for what is measured by explaining what it is we do well and how we know we are doing well. Anecdotal is just not strong enough because the legitimacy of the standardised testing is too strong and far too embedded. I think we need school-wide development work here and I would argue that we need system-wide leadership from within the profession.

Where to start? I think the NCCA document on assessment is as good a place as any\textsuperscript{34}. It is a very good document despite the fact that it doesn’t deal explicitly at any point with disadvantage. It is a very good, home grown document in relation to the different modes of assessment. We can start there but I think we need to go beyond that to a ‘grow your own’ model that captures the unique quality of each school. Over time schools will develop capacity in this type of evidence gathering and will be in a much better position to share good practice between schools but also articulate very explicitly what it is the school and its community achieves. We need to release the potential within schools to release the potential within the system. We have a really strong profession, we have very high levels of ability within the profession, and we need to release its potential, build its capacity and strengthen its influence. We really need to step up to the plate on this one otherwise in my view we will increasingly become imprisoned by the regimes of testing that are on our doorsteps.


Without such an approach I worry that we will continue to reproduce patterns of failure that obscure the real success stories. We are in real danger of impoverishing the curriculum, particularly in disadvantaged schools because this approach has had negative results when it has been done elsewhere so why would it be different here if we don't use an alternative model. Unless we grasp this nettle we are in great danger of narrowing and reducing our expectations for the outcomes of school, for pedagogy within schools and for efficacy of the education system more broadly. It is quite a challenge but I do firmly believe that the answer is within the system and within the profession.
Good afternoon delegates.

There are a few points I would like to make before we go into discussion groups and I would like to pick up on a few points raised by Gerry. First of all I would like to make some comments on the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy which previous speakers have mentioned. Secondly, I'll refer to implications arising from the strategy for our curriculum and for assessment. I also wish to comment briefly on reporting to parents. Our overarching theme for our recent education conferences has been the teaching profession in the 21st century. So I will conclude by raising some issues about teacher professionalism.

**Literacy**

When we talk about literacy in primary schools we are referring to literacy in two languages. The objectives of the Primary School Curriculum include the development of oral language, reading and writing in both Irish and English. Our expectations for pupils differ in both languages and depend on the context of the school. Nevertheless, the fact that we engage with literacy in two languages, often in linguistically diverse classrooms, cannot be ignored – as it was in the original draft plan published last November. We know that literacy in one language can support literacy development in another, and this has been ably demonstrated by teachers participating in the Modern Languages Initiative and by EAL teachers.

A second major omission in the draft plan was any reference to the socio-emotional and socio-cultural dimensions of learning. Children’s well-being has a major impact on how they learn at school. We hope to return to this particular theme at next year’s conference.

Teaching literacy is about more than teaching the technical skills of reading and writing. Children must see the point of engaging with literacy. Teachers want children to enjoy reading.

The INTO must take some credit for the differences between the draft plan and the published strategy. Many of the concerns raised in our submission and at our meetings with the Department were taken on board, though we still have reservations about some aspects, particularly the overemphasis on testing and data collection. The Department’s Circular on Literacy and numeracy is now in your schools. It is certainly an improvement on the first draft. The Minister has identified five areas in which he is requesting initial cooperation from schools for their implementation:

- Improved professional development for teachers (CPD);
- Increasing the **time** available for teaching literacy and numeracy (one hour extra per week for literacy and one hour 10 minutes for numeracy);
- Improving arrangements for **assessment** of children’s literacy and numeracy achievement;
- Better arrangement for **reporting** children’s progress;
- Co-operating with the administration of national and international assessment studies.

On the issue of time, since the introduction of the primary curriculum in 1999, teachers have said that maths had not been allocated sufficient time, and many surveys over the years indicate that in reality most teachers spend more than the allocated time on mathematics and literacy. The extra hour per week for literacy can be made available across the curriculum, but, from now on the additional time for numeracy must be visible in the timetable.
What should the Primary School Curriculum for the 21st Century look like?

The Minister has asked the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to begin the process of revising the curriculum and to provide additional resources to support the teaching of literacy and numeracy. We will probably see a revised Language and Maths curriculum where the learning outcomes will be more explicit. Teachers will welcome clarity around expectations for pupil learning as they progress through primary school. But, I pose the question - to what extent can a learning outcomes approach capture the whole essence of what we teach? Is education only about learning outcomes? And what are the implications if the expected learning outcomes are not achieved? An issue to reflect on in your groups.

A second dimension of the curriculum revisions being undertaken by the NCCA relate to the curriculum for infants. The NCCA has developed a curriculum framework for children from birth to six years, called Aistear, which is based on the most up-to-date knowledge of young children’s learning and development. The curriculum for Junior and Senior Infants will be revised in order to reflect the philosophy and approaches outlined in Aistear. The current structure, which is subject-based, will most likely change, with a greater emphasis on language and early mathematical development. These are the foundation years. But there is little point in getting the curriculum right, if we continue with infant classes of more than 30 children. What other European countries, have ratios of more than 20, let alone more than 30 children with one teacher in early years classrooms for young children!

The third dimension of curriculum revision will involve an adjustment of content in all curricular areas in order to allow more time for Language and Mathematics. The challenge here is how to retain a broad curriculum so that children are exposed to a holistic educational experience during their primary school years, while at the same time ensuring that they achieve according to their potential in literacy and numeracy. We do not want an impoverished curriculum. Learning is about a lot more than literacy and numeracy.

The National Press had a field day following the launch of the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy. But one of the headlines that caught my attention was this one from the Daily Mirror - ‘Learning banned to focus on Literacy’ - We certainly don’t want to get the balance wrong.

Assessment

Gerry has given us a fascinating presentation on some of the issues pertaining to current policy on assessment – which you will have an opportunity to consider in your discussion groups.

There are three issues to consider. Firstly, we know that assessment is integral to teaching and learning, whether it’s informal or highly formalised. Do we need to up our game in relation to our use of assessment – is the inspectors’ criticism of our underutilisation of assessment justified? Secondly, having heard Gerry, what is the appropriate role, if any, for standardised tests in improving literacy and numeracy – at school level? At system level? Why is it considered necessary to send aggregated test results to the Department every year in order to monitor trends in the system, when we already have National Assessments at system level in Literacy and Numeracy every four years? And finally, how do we identify and share our successes? There are plenty out there.

Parents

The Department has identified reporting to parents as a key element of the Literacy and numeracy Strategy. The requirement to report to parents twice a year is clearly stated in the Circular. Indeed, we know from the literature that parents’ engagement in their children’s education is one of the crucial factors in children’s achievement. Our relationships with
parents should therefore go beyond reporting. Parents are a valuable resource in their children’s learning and we need to utilize this resource. There is a lot of good work happening out there involving schools and parents, some of which we'll hear about during the conference.

**Professionalism**

Associated with economisation, globalisation and neo-liberalism, to which Gerry referred - we are increasingly dealing with a managerial approach in our public services. The concepts of performance management, performance indicators, standards, targets, outcomes, measurement, and evidence are now familiar terms in education discourse. We should not underestimate how the use of language can influence our thinking.

School Development Planning is now our performance management system.

The DEIS Support Programme and the National Strategy, which is very much based on the approaches taken in DEIS, have introduced targets and outcomes and have a strong focus on testing as a means to monitor progress – as Gerry outlined.

School Plans have become School Improvement Plans – why? Accountability is interpreted as an audit form of accountability – numbers matter. Systems like managerialism. It facilitates measurement and control. Requiring schools or teachers to do certain things makes it much easier for the system to measure compliance. Professional judgement is hard to measure!

So how is professionalism conceived in a managerial culture? Olssen et al describe managerial professionals as ‘professionals who operate efficiently and effectively … have specified competencies … are extrinsically motivated within a contractual relationship … and produce what the performance indicators measure’ (Olssen et al, 2004, p. 270)

In my view this is not how the role of the teacher is understood in Ireland at present. More democratic interpretations of teacher professionalism are built on trust, collaboration and relationships (Sachs, 2003). Indeed when Minister Quinn was asked at our Special Congress last February did he trust teachers to improve pupils’ achievement in literacy and numeracy without excessive external assessment and monitoring – he said emphatically that he did.

By acting responsibly and with integrity, and by justifying their decisions to their colleagues, their pupils, to parents or the Department, teachers are being accountable (Hoyle and John, 1995). Being compliant, competent practitioners is not sufficient. According to Judyth Sachs we need creativity, advocacy and activism too. I believe teacher professionalism in Ireland is closer to this model.

But Judyth Sachs also said that teacher professionalism can be used as a tool in education reform and we can see examples of this in the appeals to our professionalism in the Teaching Council documents and at the seminars on literacy and numeracy.

In my view, it is quite significant that the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and numeracy travelled with proposals for reform in teacher education.

Over the last few decades, reforms in education were triggered by the need to adapt education and training systems to meet the needs of industry. In the US and the UK, for example, this led to a strong focus on improving student achievement, particularly in literacy and numeracy. The drive to improve ‘standards’ saw the introduction of high-stakes standardised testing - accompanied by calls for teacher education reform.
The experience of high-stakes testing, and the history of many teacher education reforms, particularly in the US and the UK, were damaging to the teaching profession and should be lessons for us here in Ireland in how not to approach reform.

Gerry referred to the need for system-wide leadership within the teaching profession. This is a challenge we must and can embrace.

We have to make sure that our profession is strengthened as a result of current developments in teacher education and the Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy. There are opportunities here to assert our professionalism and to show leadership in how we address the challenges as presented to us. Eithne Kennedy will show how teacher professionalism at school level can enhance pupil enjoyment and achievement in literacy.

I look forward to dropping in to some lively and robust discussion groups.

Go n-éiri libh.

References


Envisioning Schools Where Literacy Thrives

Eithne Kennedy, St. Patrick's College

Thank you very much. It is wonderful to be here and to have been given the opportunity to speak to you about a topic that is very dear to my heart and one which I know is equally important to all of you here this evening.

What are we after?

I think we are living in very interesting times in Ireland not just economically but educationally too. In the past year we have had debates about standards; we have seen important policy documents launched on literacy and numeracy and indeed on teacher education itself. I believe we are at a very pivotal moment in Irish education. How we address the challenges and respond to those policies now, is, I think going to have far-reaching consequences for schools for a long time to come. Despite the pressures for instant solutions and for quick fixes I think we really need to think deeply about what it is we are really after. I titled our talk Envisioning schools where literacy thrives because for me that is what I am after: schools as places where children are excited about literacy and where they develop as readers, writers and thinkers.

As teachers we want all children to have the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential regardless of their socio-economic status or their cultural background. For me as a literacy educator that means every child emerging from primary school as a confident, engaged reader, writer and independent thinker with high expectations for themselves and their futures, and the tools, the persistence and the confidence to reach their highest aspirations.

Defining literacy

I would wish for them the thrill of weaving literacy into their lives each and every day. I would wish for school to be a place where they would have the opportunity to nurture a literacy history that they could continue to build on throughout their lives. For that to happen it means getting the message out early that reading and writing are desirable activities that are worth doing each and every day. It also means conceptualising literacy in its very broadest sense, honouring the visual, the digital and multi-modal literacies as well as print-based ones. It means providing opportunities for children to develop the creative, the emotional, and aesthetic dimensions of literacy as well as the cognitive skills and strategies that they need to be successful readers, writers and thinkers. These ideas are embodied in the most recent national and international definitions of literacy from PISA to PIRLS to Aistear, (NCCA, 2009) the early years’ framework and I know that you have been debating some of these issues in your discussion groups today and they feature in your discussion document.

But for that wide definition, that broad conceptualisation of literacy to be realised within classrooms we have to really think about how we are teaching literacy – what are we prioritising and what messages are we conveying to children about what it means to be literate. I think we have to raise our game and teach in ways that make reading and writing irresistible, desirable, meaningful and sociable activities. It means teaching in ways that hook children in so that we build their creativity, agency and curiosity about the world. If we taught like this and literacy was conceptualised and implemented in the classrooms in this broadest sense it would send out a really powerful message to children that reading and
writing are tools to be harnessed in the pursuit of knowledge and in the pursuit of their own interests, hopes and dreams, and that literacy is not just a set of isolated skills to be mastered in a linear fashion.

A school where literacy thrives

So this evening what I want to do is begin by sharing with you, a story about a school, and some teachers and children and parents who were willing to take a risk and have a go at putting that broad conceptualisation of literacy into place in their school and to share with you how we did it as we worked collaboratively over two school years. We began by looking to the research base to see what approaches looked promising, looking critically at the current literacy practices in the school, at children’s achievement, their motivation and engagement and set about pooling our expertise to see what we could do to raise achievement and realise the goal of every child a reader, writer and thinker. What I propose to do then is to share with you the basis of the research that we used to conceptualise the balanced literacy framework that was implemented and to finish by considering how the lessons learned could be put to work in more than one school.

I want to start by sharing with you some of the results of that research study (Kennedy, 2008) because I think it will demonstrate to you the magic that can happen when you have a broad-based approach to literacy within your classroom. In the school which collaborated with me there were 50% of the children reading at or below the 10th percentile at the outset. This was very much in line with the research on standards in the most disadvantaged schools in Ireland (Weir, 2003; DES, 2005) and with international research which indicates that the more disadvantaged the school the more depressed the literacy achievement scores will be (e.g. Puma et al., 1997; Goldenburg, 2002). None of the children were reading above the 70th percentile and teachers reported low levels of motivation, engagement and persistence among many children.

It took us two full years of collaboration to get a workable solution for that particular school context and for those particular kids. By the end of our two years the numbers performing below the 10th percentile had reduced to just 12%, which was wonderful and 20% were reading at or above the 80th percentile showing that these children could perform as well as their more affluent peers. While we certainly want to see raised performance on standardised test scores that is really only one element, just as important is that the children have a concomitant rise in motivation, engagement and persistence. It was evident from the interviews with the children, the classroom observations, and talking with the parents and teachers that the children were choosing to read and write both inside and outside school:

My friends, we bring our books out and we don’t play we sit on the trampoline and read a page and see can we solve the words. (Child)

Sam, his motivation for reading has really soared. He is the one I keep thinking about, the non-fiction as soon as I started that, he just took off with it, he motivated the rest of them. (Teacher)

She actually reads her older sister asleep at night. (Parent)

In terms of persistence, sometimes children will give up when a task is too difficult for them so we put a high premium on teaching children strategies so that they have the tools at their disposal to help them when they came across a tricky word or if they didn’t know how to spell a word. As one little girl said at the end of the study:
Well I think I’ve changed by I always give up when I am stuck on a work but now I use all my tools... the hardest thing I would think is when you get stuck on a word because you think oh I won’t be able to get this done but if you use all your tools then you will get it.

So an important element is giving children strategies that they can come back to, lean on and use when they encounter unfamiliar words or need to clarify a new concept. This builds their sense of independence and sense of self-efficacy as they experience success in responding to challenges.

We also tracked children’s development with spelling and they did come up to national norms in spelling. As one of the children said to me:

I think I’m getting better and better every day and that my writing is getting better and my spellings are getting better. Well I’ve grown up very fast and my brain is getting bigger and bigger with all the writing, reading and words that’s in it. I remember it and I put it into my stories.

So you can see the word work coming in there and the spelling coming along but I will also show you some of their writing samples, illustrating their writing pre and post intervention. As a baseline measure we gave them a task to write all about themselves and we gave them 20 minutes to do it. In this first sample you can see that this child is just repeating words and phrases that he knows. By the end of the first year though, he was actually writing complete sentences and thoughts. In this sample you can see real differences: the length of it; the content is also great as there is a real sense of voice and creativity coming across and the secretarial aspects such as the spelling, the grammar and the punctuation are all there too.

And this little girl you can see her baseline sample on the left hand side. She was in the semi-phonetic stage of spelling development when we started, meaning that we couldn’t actually read her writing unless she sat beside us and read it back for us. Again, you can see the dramatic changes in her writing by the end of the two years. She discovered that she loved to write fiction and formed writing collaborations with friends outside of school. This is one of her stories about a haunted house which goes on and on and on (pages 1-6). So you can see the magic that can happen, how you can transform outcomes when you have powerful literacy instruction in place in your classroom.

Look to the research base

So how did we get there? What kind of research did we use to help us on our journey? We looked at the research base around exemplary schools and teachers of literacy. What are those schools and teachers doing that are different to your more typical schools, your more typical teacher. How are they attaining higher achievement for children despite the demographics of the children attending the school? Then we looked at the research base on literacy frameworks, what skills do we need to be teaching in our classrooms, how should we be teaching them, what kinds of assessment tools should we be using, what about the time element and the materials? What are the best ways to get a change process going? So we consulted a huge body of research and talked and experimented and collaborated and gradually put together a research-based cognitively challenging balanced literacy framework over the two years (Kennedy, in press).

Community of reader, writers and thinkers

So what was really, really important in helping us achieve those results? I am foregrounding this point as it is a critical one. It is vital that you put structures in place that build a community of readers, writers and thinkers within the classroom. What we endeavour to do
is to create an environment that is ‘suffused with literary richness’ in the words of Michael Knapp (1995). In other words, we work to create an enticing literacy environment which immediately conveys to children, to visitors, that literacy is a vibrant element of this classroom. This includes visual displays of children’s work and important work taught in mini-lessons, child-friendly shelving filled with browsing boxes of levelled books, books on themes, on particular authors, and finally creating a comfortable carpeted meeting place for children to come together and think and talk their way through books and a whole host of literacy strategies.

Creating that culture of reading is critical. There must be time for independent reading every day and every child needs to know how to choose a ‘just right’ book. A ‘just right’ book is a book that they can read quite fluently but also one that is matched to their interests. It means having lots of books in a variety of genres available for them to take home to read for pleasure so they are not just reading the book that they are reading in their reading group but that they have the opportunity to take home two, three or four books a night if that is what they want to do so that they begin to develop that literacy history I mentioned at the outset and begin to cultivate a personal taste in reading: what kind of authors am I interested in, what kind of topics am I interested in reading about?

Do not underestimate the impact of that reading culture. That infusion of books and explicit attention to reading materials creates an environment where reading is seen as desirable and important. In our research, we found that those books going home with children every day rippled out far beyond the school as children began sharing them with their brothers and sisters and their extended family and it began to create a culture of reading in the home as well. If we think back to the PISA results (Perkins et al., 2010) this year, 42% of 15 year olds said they never read for fun and there was a 100 point gap between children who read for an hour a day and children who said they never read. So we have to get that motivation and engagement going at the very earliest stage possible and work to sustain it. Another finding in PISA this year was the correlation between achievement and the number of books which children had access to in the home. There was a 115 point gap between children who reported that they had access to between 0 – 10 books versus the children who had more than 500 books available. So you can see that creating that culture of reading and access to a wide variety of books is really important. It is also vital that we promote reading as thinking, provide time for it, encourage conversations around it and encourage children to recommend books to each other.

**Time for deep engagement**

A balanced literacy framework requires a minimum of 90 minutes to be successful. Time in the Irish context, I know is controversial at the current time and the idea of spending 90 minutes on literacy is new here. In actual fact, if you think about it, you kind of need 90 minutes to do any kind of in-depth work. Deep conversations about reading don’t just happen out of the blue; in terms of creativity, how do you craft a wonderful story in ten or 15 minutes or if you only write once a week? So having that daily 90 minute block is critical because it confers a value and priority on reading and writing and it provides the time for deep engagement and creativity to occur and for children to pursue topics of interest over several days or weeks and to make meaningful and authentic links across the curriculum. The extended time is critical for children in disadvantaged contexts as it gives them opportunities to accelerate their learning. If they only ever get an hour, how are they going to catch up because when they walk in the school door the research tells us (Lee & Burkham, 2002) the gap is already there?
Essentials skills

So within that 90 minutes, what should you be teaching? What do you need to have in your programme in order for it to be effective? The research would say alphabetic (phonological awareness, letters and phonics) vocabulary (different kinds), fluency, comprehension, writing, motivation and engagement and parental involvement (NICHHD, 2000; Pressley, 2006). The National Reading Panel report (NICHHD, 2000) which drove policy in America through the No Child Left Behind Act (US, 2001) channelled schools into using only evidence-based instruction within classrooms. Yet, we now know that teaching those essential skills important as they are simply isn’t enough to raise achievement; how those skills are mediated within classrooms is equally important. An evaluation in 2008 of the No Child Left Behind Act (Gamse et al., 2008) demonstrated that the time spent on essential skills had certainly increased but that there hadn’t been a significant shift in terms of children’s comprehension or their higher-order thinking skills. The National Reading Panel report has been criticised in many quarters as it was quite narrow in its approach in that it didn’t look at writing, it didn’t look at motivation, engagement or parental involvement and yet it was what drove policy in the US. It also only looked at experimental research excluding whole swathes of important qualitative research. So we need to learn a lesson from that, simply mandating policy is not enough. I think we have to be careful about over-focusing on skills and we need to make sure that other equally important elements are in place too.

A balanced literacy framework

So how can be put the research base in place in ways that are meaningful to children’s literacy development? It means putting a balanced literacy framework in place which changes according to children’s stage of development. In the early years, it means having lots of shared reading, building children’s basic skills in reading alongside their comprehension, and vocabulary so that they think and talk about a text and also recognising the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing providing opportunities for writing with the teacher through interactive writing. Then moving them on into guided reading where they are reading books in small groups that are at the right instructional level for them while also providing time for them to read books of their own choice independently. Likewise moving children into writing workshop is a critical element too when children are ready to move on from interactive writing. The teacher read aloud is another vital element captured in the words of Mem Fox, the well-known Australian children’s author who argues ‘that children should have the constant good fortune of hearing great literature, beautifully delivered into the ear and from there into the heart and from the heart into the bones’. So the read aloud is an opportunity not to kill a book but to sit back, relax and let the words wash over you and the children and to think and talk about it where appropriate.

You must have all of those elements in place for your balanced literacy framework to work and then of course you need knowledgeable teachers who have lots of assessment tools at their fingertips so they know how to move the children on from one stage to the next, for example, knowing when to move from shared reading to guided reading; in guided reading knowing when to move children on from one levelled text to the next. I am referring here to the kinds of formative assessment that will help to drive instruction in the classroom, that useful range of assessment for learning which really can transform outcomes for children when it is used well, not the standardised version that I know you have been talking a lot about today and which seems to dominate a lot of conversations around literacy at the present time.

I want to go back to the skills for a moment – when we talk about the essential skills, yes they are really important, you have to have them in your programme but if you over-focus on some skills at the expense of others I think you won’t get the results you are after. Scott Paris talks about skills being constrained or unconstrained (2005) and by constrained skills, he
means the ones that are finite skills and which once mastered contribute little to literacy development across the life-span. Let’s take phonics for example. In the English language we have 26 letters and about 44 sounds. That is a small number of letters and sounds to be mastered and once they have been mastered they actually contribute very little else to your literacy development across your life-span. Yes, they will help you to decode words but just because you can decode a word doesn’t mean that you can actually understand that word, use it in a sentence or use it in your writing. The higher-order skills of vocabulary, writing and comprehension, they are the ones that we need to concentrate most of our energies on because they are the ones that are going to continue to grow and expand across the life-span.

If we over-focus on the basic skills, the grammar, the spelling, the punctuation, and the phonics we are doing an injustice to children. The research would suggest that children who struggle with literacy receive a qualitatively different and less motivating instruction than their more highly-achieving peers and that’s because they struggle with the basic skills (Duke, 2001; Knapp, 1995). The perceived wisdom being because they haven’t got the basic skills that we had better do a mad dash on those and drill those phonics and sight words in but when you concentrate on them you don’t have time to also develop the higher-order thinking skills, use the writer’s workshop, develop creativity or to do the strategy work; all of which build the agency of the child. So these children often get a diet of lower-level skills and a slower pace to instruction which does little to accelerate learning for them. And when those skills are taught in isolation without meaningful activities oftentimes they don’t make sense to children or they don’t see them as being useful or purposeful. But we know from the research of Michael Pressley, for example, or Nell Duke or Michael Knapp, that when equal attention is given to both the lower-level skills and the higher-order ones that the lower-level skills develop alongside the higher-order ones anyway with the added advantage that a meaning-oriented approach is more effective in building children’s motivation and engagement.

So that would be my plea to you tonight not to over-focus on the basic skills but to leave room for the others, those unconstrained skills. When you focus on comprehension, for example, what you are doing is teaching kids to be active readers, to ask questions before, during and after reading; you are teaching them that reading is really about thinking about the big ideas in a text, it is about discussing them, having a conversation, learning how to listen to each other, how to respond, how to question, how to wonder, how to give an interpretation of the text, how to agree and disagree and to have the confidence to do so. With vocabulary instruction you are trying to raise their word consciousness, clueing them in to notice an unusual word, a word that they haven’t heard before, to think and talk about it, to bring it into their expressive vocabulary and the writing of their stories. We want them to notice the rich inventive precise use of words in their reading and hope that they will borrow those words and put them in their writing in apt ways. And, we are talking about putting conversational structures in place and breaking away from the typical patterns of discourse in classrooms. I suppose we are really laying the foundations for the higher-order thinking skills that are so valued in the adult world, the enquiring mind, the critical evaluative mind, the synthesising mind and the creative mind.

**Teaching using a gradual release of responsibility**

So how are we going to teach those skills? One of the things that we put a high premium on in our research was on strategy instruction so that we could build children’s independence, their sense of confidence and self-efficacy and their persistence in staying the distance with challenging work. We taught them strategies related to word work, to the higher-order thinking skills for comprehension and writing strategies as well including how to revise, proof-read and edit as well as how to improve the expression and ideas within their writing. We did that using the work of David Pearson and his colleagues in the US – the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983: Fielding & Pearson, 1994) which utilises a number of steps. First, the teacher very explicitly explains the strategy and
demonstrates how to use it by thinking out loud, showing the child the strategy in action. For example, if you were teaching children the strategy of visualising, the teacher might say something like this: *Readers, today we are going to learn another new strategy. It is called visualising and it is a strategy that good readers use as they read. Visualising means they get pictures in their head when they are reading; the story plays out like a movie in their minds. Let me show you how that works*. Then the teacher might think out loud – show the children how visualising works in relation to a suitable piece of text. Then children get into their small groups or pairs and they have the opportunity to try it out with another piece of text. This is the guided practice element. At this point the teacher can listen in on the conversations and use that as an assessment opportunity – which children understand what visualising is, which children can apply it, which children need more practice. And then letting children try it independently where they think and visualise and apply the strategy to a text of their own choice which is meaningful for them. This is a scaffolded approach whereby the teacher coaches and gradually releases responsibility to the child. Finally, then working on children’s metacognition: Let’s think about it, what did we learn today? Why did we learn the visualising strategy? What good is it anyway? How does it help me as a reader or as a writer? Let’s set a goal for ourselves. This kind of approach gets the message out that reading really is about thinking.

**Writing workshop**

And of course the other part of the balanced literacy framework is the writing workshop. If children are to experience what it is to be writer they need lots of time in daily writing workshops where they have choice and control over their writing topics so that they can get in tune with their inner voice and in the words of Teresa Grainger and her colleagues (2005) ‘*demonstrate their creativity, individuality, voice and verve.*’ They might discover over the course of a year that they have a talent for or an interest in a particular genre. Some discover that they love to write fiction or poetry or non-fiction and for others they just enjoy writing about their day-to-day lives. In fact if you asked any of the children in the schools that we work with – if you asked them what their favourite part of literacy time is the response would usually be the writing workshop. Maybe that is because it is such a personal act.

I read an interview with Bruce Springsteen, the American songwriter and rock star which for me kind of captured the essence of what writing is. He said *‘the writing and the imagining of a world that is a particular thing; that is a single fingerprint. All the film makers we love, all the song writers we love, they put their fingerprint on your imagination, in your heart, and on your soul’* (Irish Times). And I think children recognise that and that is why they love it, they begin to see the possibilities and the power of the written word. They also love the social dimension as they get to share their writing with their peers at the share session at the end of the writing workshop. That is a hugely powerful motivator for children as they gauge the reaction of the audience to their choice of topic and their choice of words. The daily time element is critical and it is also linked to success because children know that they will write every day and that they will have autonomy over their choice of topic, they actually start to invest thinking time outside of school and they come to class prepared to write. In the words of Donald Graves they enter into a ‘constant state of composition’ meaning they think about what they will write even when they are not writing. As I said earlier, we find children love to write outside of school too and as one parent said to me in interview towards the end of the project: *‘He is always writing, we have folders full of stuff’* so to get that kind of engagement going where children are excited about reading and writing outside of school is not only possible but essential.
Motivation and engagement

The balanced literacy framework, if it is done through a workshop approach builds children’s motivation effectively. It builds skills in ways that also builds the will to read and write. For that to happen the research says you must have particular conditions in place (e.g. Turner & Paris, 1995): for example, providing children with choice, giving them some element of control over the activities that they are doing, creating lessons that arouse their natural curiosity, giving them opportunities to collaborate with peers and ensure the activities have an optimum level of challenge so that they can succeed with effort which in turn will give them confidence every step of the way. Immerse the children in a talking classroom, put oral language at the heart of discussions within the reading and writing workshops you design.

Bringing the research strands together

So if we are to tie the research base together we can consider these six elements as being most critical to the success of a balanced literacy framework (Kennedy, in press)

Adopt a workshop approach: I strongly believe in the workshop approach because it actively engages children and creates the conditions for motivation and engagement to flourish.

Essential skills and strategies: weave them into the workshop. Teach them in the context of the reading or writing that children are engaged rather than in isolation through a workbook or a once-off lesson.

Build metacognition: Teach a range of strategies using the gradual release of responsibility model in order to embed awareness of the strategies into children’s consciousness so that they know why they have learned the strategies and when to call upon them.

Capitalise on children’s interests: When stocking the room with books and devising activities capitalise on children’s natural curiosity and interests.

Creativity: Give children opportunities to develop the emotional, aesthetic and creative dimensions to literacy as well as the cognitive dimensions within workshops.

Agency and independence: give children some choice and control over activities in workshops. Build in an optimal level of challenge for them so they have a chance to be successful in completing them. Convey to children that you have high expectations for them.

The workshop approach to literacy instruction really ensures that literacy is developed through authentic literacy experiences for children. Research tells us that kind of instruction is not the norm (Pressley, 2001) and as I said earlier, it is less likely to be encountered by children who struggle with literacy, yet it has the power to truly transform outcomes and contribute to a more just and equitable society.

Envisioning schools where literacy thrives

So getting started on that process as a school, how do you do it? Well, first of all, you need to be aware of what a balanced literacy framework is and what the research says about each element. You can come together as a whole staff and ask some key questions: what are our strengths, what is working really well for us, what are we doing really well? Are there
elements of that balanced literacy framework that we are missing and if so what can we do about that? We also need to look at children’s current achievement – where are they? Are they where they should be? How can we accelerate them up to the next level? How motivated and engaged are they? Thinking through our teaching practices, are we teaching in ways that captivate and engage children? And then if you choose one thing from the balanced literacy framework that you are not doing, and then look to the research base and see what the research says about that particular element and then go after it. Find the professional readings, take a course, come together as a staff and read and think your way through it. You can build on the expertise of the people on your staff; you may already have people who have a particular interest or expertise in literacy. It is about coming together as a staff and deciding where your priorities are, taking ownership of the change process and gradually putting a cognitively challenging balanced literacy framework in place.

You don’t want to introduce too many changes too fast because that will overwhelm and turn people off. Take it one step at a time. Adopt an enquiry stance and investigate how the changes you make are impacting on children’s motivation and engagement and their achievement. Consider what might need to be tweaked or changed. Coming together often to think and talk your way through it will make a huge difference to you. That is how we did it. We experimented, we helped each other out, we had a go at things and we would come back and debate issues, challenge ideas and gradually over time we got a framework that worked. Once you have had success with one element, you add another element and then you go back on the same cycle all over again until you have that systematic balanced literacy framework in place and then of course you need to sustain it over time.

The teachers that I have worked with have found that whole process professionally stimulating and most rewarding. They have found that it has changed the way they think about reading and writing and changed their teaching. So the power of professional development occurs when teachers themselves have control and ownership over it. I know it can have a huge impact on children’s achievement, their motivation and their engagement and that positive change for teachers brings with it a sense of success and self-efficacy which is so important for us all to experience in what we do daily. It is what keeps us going, that sense of satisfaction. Of course it is a big undertaking and it is best if it is done through a whole staff approach with everybody working together towards the same vision. That will ensure that children experience many years of research-based instruction that will make a difference and you can build on your successes from one year to the next.

In conclusion

At a time I think when there is a concern about standards, as there is now in Ireland, there is a real danger that we could have a return to a back to basics agenda, when what we really need is a research-based approach to our literacy instruction which will allow teachers to create classrooms that develop children’s literacy skills in ways that build their critical thinking and problem-solving skills but in ways which also nurtures their imagination and creativity so that they may develop to their fullest potential.

So for me putting literacy in its broadest sense at the heart of curriculum renewal is essential in empowering children to realise their full potential, to discover their own individual fingerprint in this world and I suppose it is really about creating the right conditions for the next generation of entrepreneurs, artists, scientists, historians, musicians and literary giants to flourish. It is complex and is not an easy road to travel but it is a most rewarding one and I think if we believe that education is the great equaliser, the future is in our hands because we as teachers are critical decision makers, we are the key to change, our expertise matters and how we conceptualise literacy in our classroom really counts. Every child a reader, a writer
and a thinker is possible and I think I will leave the last word to one of the teachers in my study who said ‘I think it affirmed for me that if the right structures are put in place and resources and thinking then something amazing can happen.’

References


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Overall Analysis of Current Economic Context

From the outset of the downturn, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions warned that austerity measures were a recipe for disaster. Warnings that the ‘austerity only’ approach would depress demand, increase unemployment and damage growth were ignored. We are living with the consequences.

The domestic economy is destroyed, employment is devastated and emigration the only option for thousands. Vital public services like education are suffering cutbacks and those who work in them are seeing their salaries and pensions reduced and their working hours extended.

And austerity only is failing across Europe. This is because European leaders are failing to address the real problem which is the convergence of a banking crisis, a growth-and-competitiveness crisis and a fiscal crisis.

Ireland’s banking problems are mirrored across Europe with German and French banks particularly overleveraged. In total, Europe’s banks owe €40 trillion. EU growth has stalled and competition from the BRIC countries intensifying. And as we can see from Ireland’s case austerity will never close the government’s fiscal deficit.

It is increasingly obvious that Ireland’s budget deficit target of 3% of GDP by 2015 will not be met.

The only credible way to a sustainable long term recovery is to grow the economy through investment, deficit reduction, the taxation of latent sources of revenue, the protection of a basic banking system, achieving savings that do not take large amounts of money out of the economy and extending the adjustment period.

This needs to be pursued not just in Ireland but across Europe both inside and outside the Eurozone.

That doesn’t mean Ireland can leave everything to Europe. Sarkozy and Merkel won’t solve our problems.

We must tackle our jobs crisis. Job creation is the key to growth which will mean investment in suitable projects to promote growth.

What is left of the National Pension Reserve Fund should be utilised to invest in addressing the jobs crisis rather than in bank subsidies or foreign equities. The ICTU plan to encourage the investment of private pension funds in valuable and necessary construction projects in Ireland must be fully investigated and pursued.

To date, the burden of budgetary adjustment has been carried by ordinary workers and their families. The corporate sector must play its part.

Government must act in the interests of the people, not the markets. It must force down the value of all bondholders’ holdings - which they risked in recklessly-run, private banks.

The wealthy must pay their fair share. Tax exemptions and reliefs which narrow the tax base and have no proven benefit to the taxpayer must be closed. DIRT taxes can be increased, as can tax for high earners using avoidance schemes and a lower limit placed on earnings for
pension purposes. Capital gains benefits can be taxed as income, the threshold for inheritance reduced with protections for low income people living in inherited property, and a wealth tax introduced on wealth.

I urge each of you to read the ICTU’s pre-budget submission ‘Growth is the Key’ and use every chance you get to advance the arguments in it. The work of the new Economic Unit in Congress is evident in the quality of the arguments in that document.

Clearly these issues underpin all our work. They are the backdrop against which all national public policy including today’s topic for discussion is framed.

**Literacy and Numeracy**

There are just over half a million pupils in Irish primary schools. Nearly one in five is in supersized classes of thirty or more and four in five is in large classes greater than the EU average. This is the elephant in the room when it comes to literacy and numeracy.

Large and supersized classes have a bigger impact on the quality of education, the quality of pupils’ future lives and the quality of this country’s social and economic future than any new strategy for literacy and numeracy.

A strategy dictating more time, more assessment and more reporting will not make a significant difference until teachers are empowered to implement the curriculum as intended.

Our modern up to date curriculum was never meant for overcrowded classes. It is based on the best international practice, the most up to date research and recommends the most modern teaching methods. It simply cannot be implemented as intended in overcrowded classrooms.

Primary education should give children a fair start in life, develop their talents and equip them with the skills, attitudes and knowledge to live their lives to the full and to play a full part in the Ireland of tomorrow and indeed, the world of tomorrow. It is no exaggeration to say that what happens in classrooms today, what we invest today will shape children’s future lives. And literacy and numeracy are key skills.

The literacy and numeracy strategy purports to set out key targets and timelines but conveniently ignores another key target and timeline. A decade ago we were promised smaller classes. Today we are threatened with larger classes. A decade ago, a clear commitment was given that class sizes for children under nine would be reduced to less than twenty. This promise was made in the full knowledge that classes less than twenty are the international benchmark. 20:1 is international best practice.

Since that promise was made, there has been no movement to reduce the size of our classes. Average class sizes in Ireland remain the second highest in the EU. Only in Ireland will you find overcrowded classrooms on this scale. Only in Ireland will you find one adult with as many pupils. Only in Ireland has there been this level of government underperformance on reducing the size of classes. Only in Ireland are timelines and targets like this set and then ignored.

Class size is the key to literacy and numeracy. All the research points to positive outcomes when children are young.
The more children there are in a class the less teacher time there is available for each child. A shocking fact is that in junior infant classes there is at most eight minutes of teacher time per day for each individual child. The classrooms of today are different from three decades ago. Special needs children, newcomer children and disadvantaged children now sit side by side in our classrooms. The reality is that teacher time given to children with special needs takes away time from other children. Teacher time spent helping newcomer children to learn basic English takes away from other children. Teacher time given to children suffering the effects of socio-economic disadvantage takes away from other children.

In overcrowded classrooms, time spent organising large groups of young children for the most basic of tasks takes away from teaching and learning time. Crowd control is the order of the day – teaching and learning is an added bonus.

The foundations of future learning, success in school, leaving cert points, and maybe even university degrees are built in the primary school. It is in the younger classes in the primary school that the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to learning are developed. For all our progress in the area of technology, literacy and numeracy skills are still a vital skill in today’s world. The smaller the class the more time each child will get. It means that each child will get more quality time with the teacher when learning to read or learn mathematics.

How can a teacher be expected to engage meaningfully with a young child learning to read while at the same time supervising, managing, monitoring, entertaining and humouring thirty other children in the same room?

Teachers who have had smaller classes know the benefits – they can hear pupils read regularly, they can give them the individual attention, they can spot problems quickly and they can solve them. Teachers with over thirty children in their classes will tell me that they can scarcely hear each child read once per week. In large classes the same applies to numeracy. Literacy and numeracy difficulties are not picked up as quickly. A child who is struggling does not have her or his difficulties fixed straight away.

In smaller classes teachers can engage in one to one teaching and small group teaching. The quieter children who often lack the confidence to deal with large groups benefit most. Children with special needs who spend the majority of their school day in overcrowded classrooms also benefit.

Many people think that motivated and able children can survive well in large classes. But these children also need to have their efforts and achievements recognised. They need individual attention so that they can be stretched and working at their ability levels.

The excuse that we as a country cannot afford it does not apply. The truth is that we cannot afford not to do it. Our children will have to compete for their economic futures with the brightest and the best around the globe. We cannot afford to allow our children be left behind.

We must give kids their chance.
Discussion Groups and Workshops

Delegates were assigned to different discussion groups to facilitate closer examination of some of the issues that arose from the conference documentation and presentations. Each discussion group was given a list of questions to focus on and topics discussed included a definition of literacy in the 21st century; curriculum; assessment; policy and planning; early childhood education and literacy; targeted support; professional development; home school links; digital literacy and professionalism. Members of the INTO Education Committee acted as facilitators and rapporteurs. Reports from the discussion groups summarizing the views of participants were collated under thematic heading and are outlined below.

**Literacy in the 21st century**
The discussion groups agreed with the point made in the discussion document that ‘the definition of literacy should be widened from simply reading and writing to encompassing skills such as oral language, comprehension, analytical skills and use of IT’. It was noted that literacy is the development of communication skills to prepare individuals for life. Participants felt that testing of literacy and publishing these in results form such as PISA are a very narrow focus of literacy as they don’t reflect all the communicative skills. Tests, such as PISA, would appear to favour children from higher socio-economic backgrounds. It was also noted that pupils’ needs are changing and that teachers need to adapt their teaching methodologies.

**Successful strategies employed in teaching Literacy**
Individual delegates outlined the strategies employed in their schools to teach literacy. These included Power Hour, Reading Recovery, Peer Tutoring, Shared Reading and increased parental involvement. It was also felt that there was a need to return to teaching children basic skills – phonics, sight vocabulary, word analysis, contextual analysis.

**Curriculum**
Participants felt that oracy was one very important area to develop with pupils as it permeates pupils’ reading and writing. Whilst acknowledging that the development of oracy can be challenging in a big class, it was noted that it can be developed right across the curriculum.

Oral language is closely linked to reading comprehension. Newcomer children (EAL) can be competent technical readers but can lack understanding of the texts.

There is a need for smaller class sizes with an increased emphasis on oral language. Oral language needs to be integrated in a cross-curricular way.

Participants noted that children present in infant classes with a more pronounced language deficit compared to the previous generations. Some participants suggested that there is a need for a specific language programme for children in disadvantaged areas and DEIS schools in particular.
It was felt that curriculum overload is becoming an issue for teachers and there was a mixed reaction to re-presenting the 1999 curriculum in the form of outcomes rather than content objectives.

Presenting the curriculum in terms of learning outcomes was seen as a good idea by some delegates and it was suggested that this was also the view of ILSA.

**Assessment**
Teachers assess daily using a range of tools – observation, checklists, teacher-designed tasks, portfolios and tests. Standardised tests are a narrow measure of assessment. Participants questioned the validity of these tests considering that they seem to assess all children on norms appropriate to a higher socio-economic class grouping. It was felt that schools should be encouraged to reflect more and develop self-assessment at pupil, school and system level. It was also felt that teachers may be encouraged to ‘teach to the test’ and that this was at odds with an holistic approach to education which strives to bring out the best in each individual pupil.

Participants felt that there needs to be a better system in place to show progression of pupils from year to year or one class grouping to the next. It was also felt that building portfolios could show progression through terms and years.

**Digital Literacy**
Many delegates felt that the interactive whiteboard is an excellent tool as it contains an excellent range of resources. One delegate remarked that digital literacy should permeate every area of the curriculum. Another participant felt that children should be proficient in the traditional literacies before moving on to digital literacy. It was felt that pupils need training in how to access information and how to use that information. Participants felt that pupils need to become critical thinkers. Schools have become more technologically advanced but we need to reflect on how these tools are used to best advantage.

**Workshops**
All delegates got the opportunity to attend two workshops. The workshop presenters and their subject areas are listed below:

- Áine Cregan: *Oral Language*
- Martin Gleeson: *Emergent Literacy*
- Anne McMorrough: *ICT & Literacy*
- Joni Clarke: *Parental Involvement*
- John Stewart: *Family Literacy*
- Bernadette Dwyer: *New Literacies*
- Deirdre Kirwan: *EAL*
- Mary Kelly: *Childhood Development Initiative, Tallaght*
- Martina Gannon: *youngballymun*