LITERACY in the primary school

An INTO Publication

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The major impact of a literacy difficulty in terms of a child's ability to benefit fully from educational opportunities and their ability to participate fully in society is a matter of deep disquiet and concern. Literacy difficulties present a major challenge to the teaching profession and one to which we must respond urgently. The publication of a Report on Literacy is timely for a number of reasons. The levels of literacy as measured and reported upon in many recent reports and surveys are giving cause for concern among teachers. A Revised English Curriculum with new emphases is currently being implemented. The recent publication of the Learning Support Guidelines has raised some serious questions surrounding the current organisation of remedial education.

In publishing this report the Education Committee wishes to acknowledge that literacy problems do exist and that, as teachers, dealing with literacy difficulties is part and parcel of our professional responsibility. But it is also our responsibility to point out flaws in the system. Whether it be discipline problems, curricular problems, or indeed reading problems it is our function to identify and draw attention to them and enunciate a professional response.

While acknowledging that problems do exist this publication contributes further to the debate on literacy and signals the need for a multifaceted approach to tackling literacy difficulties. This publication contains a description of the main findings of the Literacy Surveys, and the Review of Remedial Education in Irish Primary Schools. Some intervention strategies which have been
used in Ireland and abroad in raising literacy standards are outlined. The document also contains a historical account of the approaches to the teaching of reading which have traditionally been used in Irish primary schools along with an outline of the main elements of the approach to the teaching of reading which is contained in the Revised English Curriculum.

The second part of the publication is a compilation of teachers’ classroom practice in relation to the teaching of Literacy. By publishing some of the approaches which work most successfully for many teachers a rich tableau of current practice is painted. The INTO would like to thank all those teachers who gave generously of their time to write their ‘stories’ for this report.

The INTO wishes to acknowledge the help, co-operation and assistance of all those who contributed in various ways to compiling this document. In particular, the INTO would like to thank all members of the Education Committee, but especially the members of the Literacy sub committee, who contributed enormously to this document, Ted Motherway, Milo Walsh, Paul Brennan, Peter Mullan and Anne Healy.

Finally, the INTO wishes to thank all in Head Office who were involved in the preparation and publication of the report.

Senator Joe O’Toole
General Secretary 2001
Introduction

The findings of various reports on literacy levels among our population (The National Surveys of Reading Attainment; The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement Reading Survey [IEA, 1991] and the International Adult Literacy Survey [IALS, 1997]) have generated debate, controversy and increasing public interest and concern about literacy levels in our schools. Literacy is a complex topic and many varying views are held in relation to it. However, whatever one’s views on approaches and methodologies used, it cannot be disputed that current literacy levels as measured and reported upon pose challenges which we as a profession must address.

In light of this the Education Committee of the INTO decided to undertake a project relating to literacy in the English language, particularly in relation to reading. The objectives of this project were:

- to describe and analyse the findings of the literacy surveys;
- to examine the conclusions and recommendations of the Study of Remedial Education in Irish Primary Schools;
- to make clear statements about the size and nature of literacy problems in Ireland;
- to stimulate debate among members about the findings of the literacy surveys, about approaches to the teaching of literacy skills and about approaches taken when difficulties in relation to literacy arise for some children;
- to formulate a professional response to the issue of literacy in the primary school by establishing effective strategies for
dealing with children who have literacy problems.

This publication represents the completion of the project. It is hoped that its contents and the contributions made by the teachers to the second part of this book will stimulate self reflection on current teaching methods. It is hoped that, by sharing with others the strategies which work most successfully for us, a greater understanding of the richness of practice which exists among the teaching profession will emerge.

Chapter 1 deals with the approaches to the teaching of reading which have been used in Irish primary schools and how these approaches contributed to the standards of literacy in Ireland. The chapter critiques the approaches advocated in the 1971 Curriculum and also looks at factors that hindered its implementation, particularly in relation to the teaching of reading.

Chapter 2 of this document analyses what is meant by literacy; the different definitions used in different surveys and the findings of these surveys. It reviews critically the Teachers’ Study Group Surveys; The National Surveys of Reading Attainment; The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Reading Survey and the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). This chapter includes clear statements about literacy levels in Ireland. It points to the fact that Irish children and adults are not performing as well as their counterparts in most other developed countries. It further points out that Irish children have not shown an improvement in reading attainment in the last twenty years and it highlights the need for teachers as a profession along with others to respond proactively to these issues.

Chapter 3 examines the section of the Revised Curriculum relating to English. It focuses on the approaches advocated and highlights how this curriculum represents a coherent, front line response to the challenge of raising literacy levels and preparing pupils for the changed world of the 21st century.
Chapter 4 deals with remedial/learning support education in Ireland. It outlines the development of the remedial/learning support service, including the changes and advances which have taken place in remedial education in recent years. The chapter reviews the development of policy on remedial/learning support education in Ireland. The findings of two research studies on remedial education which highlight some discrepancies between policy and practice are analysed. The challenge for teachers arising from these discrepancies in organising and presenting effective remedial support programmes is discussed.

Chapter 5 identifies some of the possible approaches and strategies reducing reading difficulties which have been used in other countries, particularly the United States, New Zealand and Great Britain. These approaches, in general, stress the importance of prevention and early intervention, parental support programmes, and whole school approaches.

Immediately following the 1999 Education Conference at which literacy was discussed the INTO invited practising teachers to make submissions regarding their actual classroom practice in relation to the teaching of literacy. Part Two of the publication is a compilation of the submissions subsequently received and articles previously carried in InTouch and Education Today.

The final section deals with general conclusions and recommendations in relation to dealing with literacy problems in Ireland. This section outlines some of the challenges which face teachers and policy makers arising from the preceding chapters.

A number of appendices contain reference information on literacy issues.
Chapter 1

The Teaching of Reading in Irish Primary Schools

Reading in the National School – the early years

When the Irish national school system was established in 1831 the teaching of reading reflected methods that were common in other countries. Pedagogical approaches were highly structured and rigid with little emphasis on comprehension, silent reading or pupil response to the material read. A mechanistic approach was adopted involving the rote learning of words, sequential reading aloud and strict adherence to a set class textbook which according to Moloney (1998) led to a reading programme that was generally narrow, formal and uninspiring.

The introduction of ‘Payment by Results’ led to an even more rigid methodology with a prescribed text book as the basis for reading tests conducted by the inspectorate. There was an emphasis on reading with ‘ease and correctness from the unchanging textbook’ while there was little focus on comprehension and vocabulary. Rote learning of a single text often resulted directly from this system. It is probable that the traditional class reading lesson, which stressed sequential reading aloud from the reader dates from this period.

However, when the report of the Belmore Commission on Primary Education rejected the ‘Payment by Results’ system there was a pedagogical shift which today would be described in terms of a move from ‘skills’ to ‘whole language’. The rules and regulations
of the Commissioners of National Education in 1902 identified English reading as the most important learning activity in the school. The programme emphasised the importance of silent reading and comprehension; teachers were given freedom to select texts and it contained advice that school libraries would ‘foster a love of reading in children’. Within the context of a balanced, child centred curriculum, there were significant changes in reading content and presentation, along with an emphasis on the centrality of oral language.

English in the Curriculum (1922)

English reading ceased to be the most important activity in the school when the new ‘Programme of Instruction’ was introduced into primary schools in 1922. This programme provided for a new emphasis on the Irish language with the subsequent downgrading of the teaching of English reading. This policy was accelerated in 1932 when notice was given to managers and teachers of national schools that:

(a) “The teaching of English is no longer permitted in Infant Classes where the teachers are competent to do the work of the class through Irish alone. English is an optional subject in Standard I.
(b) “A new programme has been prepared in English, less ambitious in scope than that hitherto in operation.”

Approval continued to be required for school texts which were nationalistic and religious in content, demanding in vocabulary and syntax and moralistic and didactic in tone. Despite such restrictions some teachers endeavoured to introduce more enlightened approaches including silent reading, retelling by pupils of narrative and exploration of texts. Nevertheless, a generally mundane and unexciting approach was exacerbated by a lack of books. This lack of resources was highlighted by the INTO in its Plan for Education (1947) which stated:
“It is generally admitted that the child’s reading should not be confined to his school texts and that he should be encouraged to read for pleasure, but as things stand at present the average child, and particularly the child of working-class parents, has little chance of obtaining books which suit his needs.”

A small move towards restoring the importance of English reading was made in 1951 when the *Notes for Teachers: The Infant School* made this concession.

“English is an optional subject in the infant school; it may be taught for half an hour a day. The course should include speech-training, stories, informal conversation, rhymes, poems, verse-speaking and drama. The initial steps in the teaching of reading may be taken in an informal way if the teacher so desires and if the children are likely to profit by it.”

While there was to be no official curriculum change until 1971 there is evidence that in some schools some changes in English teaching were implemented. A core set of reference books was provided for all schools, schools began to develop book collections which were supplemented by Local Authority provision. Moreover the content, tone and illustration of textbooks became more attractive. Yet, round robin reading dominated reading lessons and the official status of English as being of lesser importance than Irish (and even mathematics) weakened any such improvements.
The 1971 English Curriculum

The status of the teaching of reading was officially raised with the introduction of a new curriculum, *Curraclam na Bunscoile* (1971). *The Teacher’s Handbook* stated that:

“The ability to read is perhaps the most important skill that the school has to impart to the child. To regard reading as either a subject of instruction or as a tool for learning is to minimise its importance: it is both these things and it is also a most important aid to the child in fulfilling himself as a child, an aid without which his personal and educational development cannot proceed very far.”

It advocated teaching approaches consistent with research based best practice at that time. Suggestions for the teaching of reading outlined in the curriculum favoured a balanced approach but it would appear that few were implemented. For instance, word-recognition came to be dominated by teaching key-words from the earliest books of reading schemes even though at least eight other ‘devices’ were recommended.

*The Teacher’s Handbook* advised that:

“Nearing the end of the pre-reading period the child will be introduced to the first Reader… The timing of this introduction will be all important and premature formal teaching can be detrimental to attitudes and to interest.”
Warnings such as this about the early introduction of formal reading schemes were not widely heeded – mainly because of the pressure of parental expectations and a lack of alternative resources.

The use of reading schemes was advocated but allowance was made for flexibility in their use. It was even suggested that some children might not need them after ‘about eight or nine years of age’. However, reading schemes continued to dominate the teaching of reading with a concomitant emphasis on Look-and-Say approach to the teaching of words from the reader rather than on whole-language approaches or on the teaching of letter-sound relationships. However, it should be pointed out that recently published Irish schemes have many whole-language elements including natural language and connected texts rather than excessively controlled language and contrived texts. The books from reading schemes for middle and senior classes have whole-language elements, including examples of children’s literature. In addition, many Irish teachers have used non-Irish reading programmes incorporating books that though graded are virtually indistinguishable from ‘real’ books.

It is clear that a combination of other factors have diluted the impact of what was proposed by the 1971 curriculum. Inservice developments that were planned to support change fell victim to financial constraints caused by subsequent international oil crises. The INTO in its 1975 and 1986 reviews of curriculum implementation reported on principals being unfamiliar with the proposed curricular change and an Inspectorate that continued to evaluate teachers on ‘classical’ instructional techniques. In this way much of what was learned and developed in the Colleges of Education was ‘washed out’ by the reality of the school. It is clear that large class size adversely affected much of what was proposed, as did a failure to resource the changes.
The spirit and tone of the 1971 curriculum changed the atmosphere of primary schools in a dramatic manner and, while significant progress has been made in recent years, a great deal remains to be implemented. Textbooks and workbooks remain dominant influences on lesson planning and sequencing of work. School planning remains underdeveloped due to a failure to resource and support the concept with training for teachers. The outcomes of educational research do not appear to influence significantly classroom planning and, therefore, classroom practice. The school development planning initiative was set up in 1999 and is currently being evaluated. It is hoped that this initiative will be expanded to include all schools by 2005.

However, as the following chapter indicates, the promise of the 1971 curriculum has not impacted significantly on reading standards during the past 20 years. It is obvious that some of the above mentioned factors contribute to this. Careful analysis of research into reading outcomes, both national and international, is necessary before conclusions relating to the scope and the scale of the challenges are drawn.
The Revised English Curriculum (1999)

Introduction

All aspects of the primary curriculum were reviewed by the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum between 1987 and 1990. Its Report led to the establishment in November 1991 of Primary Curriculum Committees of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

In reviewing the teaching of English, the Curriculum Committee took account of the latest developments in the teaching of reading. A comprehensive review of research in the field of reading was undertaken and the resulting approach to the teaching of reading contained in the English curriculum and elaborated upon in the Teacher Guidelines for English incorporates a range of interactive strategies that educational experience has shown to produce the most effective results in the teaching of reading. They represent a focus for classroom teachers to implement what must be considered as a first line approach to meeting the challenges of raising standards of literacy.

The introduction to the Revised Curriculum in English acknowledges the importance of the development of high standards of literacy. It recognises that language learning is an integrated process in which it is difficult to separate the functions of reading, oral language and writing which are related and interact with each other in many different ways. Nevertheless, it states that:
“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.”

Emphasising the acquisition of literacy as a principal concern of the English curriculum in line with stated national policy the introduction also points out the importance of acquiring reading, comprehension and writing skills in a systematic way. In addition, the importance of the early identification of pupils with particular learning needs and the provision of adequate remedial support is stressed.

The Goals of Language Learning

The main divisions of the English curriculum, called strands, are stated as four general goals of language learning. These are receptiveness to language; competence and confidence in using language; developing cognitive abilities through language; and emotional and imaginative development through language. These strands also embody two fundamental principles of the curriculum which are that language is integrated and that children not only learn language but also learn through language.

Receptiveness to language is an essential part of the child’s mastery of language and involves developing an appreciation of the speaker-listener relationship, learning to listen attentively and respond to verbal and non-verbal cues that enhance meaning. It is central to the development of literacy that children acquire an appreciation of text conventions and the ability to use a range of reading/comprehension skills.

Competence and confidence in using language is concerned with an appreciation of the usefulness and pleasures of reading. This is
developed through building on and developing reading and comprehension skills. Access to a variety of texts, opportunities for silent reading and freedom to choose reading material are a central part of this process.

The development of cognitive abilities through language focuses on using language to learn. In the early years play and drama will play a central role but as the child gets older reading will become an increasingly important context. Children should engage with a growing range of expository and representational text.

The strand which deals with emotional and imaginative development through language allows children to explore the world of the imagination through literature and stories. These can expose the child to a wide variety of emotional life and lead to a better understanding of human motivation and feeling.

The aims and broad objectives of the English curriculum as laid out reflect the integrated nature of these strands. Within each strand there are three strand units of oral language, reading and writing. The following overview table illustrates this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Receptiveness to language</th>
<th>Oral</th>
<th>developing receptiveness to oral language</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>developing concepts of language and print/developing strategies (1st-6th classes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>creating and fostering the impulse to write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strands</td>
<td>Strand units</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competence and confidence</td>
<td>• Oral developing competence and confidence in using oral language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reading developing reading skills and strategies/reading for pleasure and information (1st-6th classes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Writing developing competence, confidence and the ability to write independently.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing cognitive abilities through language</td>
<td>• Oral developing cognitive abilities through oral language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reading developing interests, attitudes and the ability to think (information retrieval skills in 4th-6th classes).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Writing clarifying thought through writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional and imaginative development through language</td>
<td>• Oral developing emotional imaginative life through oral language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reading responding to text</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Writing developing emotional and imaginative life through writing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The English Curriculum Statement

In infant classes children will be provided with opportunities to listen to, enjoy and respond to stories, rhymes, poems and songs. They will be encouraged to play with language and develop an awareness of sounds through activities such as language games, poems, chants and rhymes. Children will learn book conventions, become familiar with a wide range of environmental print, learn to recognise and name letters and develop an awareness of some letter sound relationships.

In a well resourced classroom pupils will handle and browse books, engage in collaborative reading of large format books and experience the reading process being modelled. They build up a sight vocabulary of common words and learn to isolate parts of words.

Re-reading, retelling and acting out of stories, the recall of significant details and the analysis of characters and situations are central to the development of cognitive abilities. Children will be encouraged to predict outcomes and future incidents.

Emotional and imaginative development entails children responding to stories and relating them to real experience. Print is associated with enjoyment and reading perceived as a shared and enjoyable experience.

In First and Second Classes children will continue to experience the reading process being modelled and engage in shared reading activities. The continued building of sight vocabulary is complemented by engagement in activities designed to increase sound awareness. Reading skills and styles are developed through the engagement with appropriate reading material.
Children should be exposed to a range of children’s literature from which they can read aloud or silently. The development of personal reading is underpinned by the class, school or public library through which interests can be pursued. Information technology can be used to increase motivation and enhance reading development. The importance of enhancing levels of self esteem through success at reading is stressed.

By Third and Fourth Classes children should be able to use more than one strategy to deal with unfamiliar text and words. As increasingly independent readers children should have access to a plentiful supply of suitable books. The development of personal taste in reading for pleasure and information is a central aspect of reading at this stage. The child continues to develop a range of comprehension strategies to deal with narrative, expository and representational reading material along with a knowledge of the structure of books and printing conventions.

Children at this stage should be provided with opportunities to respond to increasingly challenging reading material through talking about books, choice of books and personal taste. They should also experience a shared response to fiction through, for example, the use of a class novel.

In Senior Classes children should achieve proficiency in word identification and understanding through the use of a variety of strategies. When children become self reliant and independent readers, time should be provided for sustained silent reading. Other reading material such as the newspaper should be studied along with a more challenging range of poems, stories and novels. The school and/or classroom should be a source of a wide range of reading materials such as magazines, materials relating to hobbies and interests and reference materials. Study skills are developed and children increasingly find, interpret and present information.
Conclusion

Because language learning is seen as an integrated process the approach to the teaching of reading is grounded, in the first place, in children’s general language development. In the early stages a rich experience of oral language development is an essential basis for preparing children to read. This is directed towards helping children to acquire a strong language base in terms of vocabulary and facility in language use. A key element in this is the development of the child’s phonological awareness. Before children engage with reading formally they should have gained an awareness of sounds in words, of initial sounds, of words that rhyme with each other, of final sounds. The development of phonological awareness is approached through activities that will include saying and hearing nursery rhymes and rhymed stories; reproducing rhymes; clapping and dancing to syllabic rhythms; playing ‘I spy’ games involving onsets and rimes; segmenting of sentences into individual words; segmenting of words into syllables; and matching the length of a word to its utterance.

Basic sight vocabulary, an important element of the language base needed before beginning a structured reading programme, is acquired from a number of sources such as: environmental print; labelling; flash cards; language experience material; and large format books.

The collaborative reading of large format books and language experience material with the teacher is an important element in children’s early reading experience. This too is closely integrated with oral language activity and will enable children to develop a knowledge of the conventions of print including; that a line of text moves from left to right; the letters in a word move from left to right; text starts at the top left hand corner; words are separated by spaces; and punctuation marks play a role in text.
Essential for all of this activity is the experience of a print rich environment in the classroom including the provision of a library corner where children are encouraged to handle and browse through books. The availability of books in the classroom and creation of an atmosphere in which children are encouraged to read and enjoy books is a recommended feature of the approach to reading right through primary school.

A central principle of the approach to reading in the curriculum is that children are encouraged to read for meaning. Reading according to the curriculum, is not a matter of being able to recognise particular words but rather the purpose of those words on the page and the way they are arranged conveys a message. In order to read and comprehend that message children are encouraged to use a combination of cueing strategies to predict the meaning of the message on the page including semantic cues to check if their predictions make sense; syntactic cues to check if it ‘sounds right’; a knowledge of the conventions of print to check if there is word by word fit; and grapho-phonic cues to apply their knowledge of letter/sound relationships in order to check if their predictions are right.

The knowledge of sound-letter relationships is increasingly important in enabling children to read and comprehend text. A particular strategy that the curriculum advocates is the use of ‘onsets and rime’ in developing children’s ability to recognise and manipulate sounds in words.

A key element in the approach to the teaching of reading is that children experience a wide variety of texts and be encouraged to respond to the text in a variety of ways. Their experience of a structured reading scheme is supplemented by a range of other reading experiences. The class library is a key resource in this respect along with such activities as the use of the class novel.
Because reading for meaning is central to the approach to reading the development of comprehension skills is at the core of the reading programme. The ultimate objective of reading is comprehension or the reconstruction of meaning. Meaning, or at least the full meaning, will not emerge immediately but grows gradually and in the process is redefined, revised and reformulated by the reader when s/he engages with text and reflects on it. It entails much more than word recognition. From the outset children are encouraged to engage consistently in basic comprehension activities such as re-telling a story, recalling details of characters and events and predicting outcomes in stories. This forms the basis for the development of the higher comprehension skills such as analysis, deduction, summarisation, inference, prediction, confirmation, synthesis, evaluation and correlation. Comprehension skills are developed through an engagement with the three different forms of text, (narrative, informational and documentary) and comprehension activities will have a strong oral language base.

The revised curriculum also stresses the importance of parental involvement in children’s reading and emphasises the use of information and communication technologies in enhancing the development of children’s reading and comprehension skills. It is expected that these changes along with the variety and balance in the new programme will benefit all Irish primary school pupils reflecting as they do a response to the findings of international research on reading. They are also a response to the measured deficits of recent surveys. The introduction of the Revised Curriculum in English must generate a renewed enthusiasm and focus among all charged with seeking improvements that will lead to a rise in reading standards similar to that of the early 1970s.
A Review of Literacy Surveys

Definitions of Literacy

Data on literacy obviously depends on a definition of literacy. Early surveys of literacy divided the population crudely into those who were considered ‘literate’ and those who were ‘illiterate’. These crude divisions are no longer considered appropriate and modern studies seek to identify levels of literacy and a number of literacy domains. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), for instance, identified five levels of literacy in three domains. The question is therefore not ‘Can you read?’ but rather ‘How well do you read?’ The definition of literacy used in the Report Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society is a good example of a modern understanding of literacy:

The term ‘literacy’ refers to particular skills, namely the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.

This definition, together with the notion of levels and domains, provides the context for examination of the findings of modern surveys of Irish literacy in contrast to the way in which literacy was previously assessed.
Empirical Studies of Irish Literacy Standards

As far back as 1841, Irish literacy standards were being assessed by examination of census of population returns and purported to show that between 1841 and 1881, levels of illiteracy fell from 53% to 25%. The same official statistics also indicated that by 1901 illiteracy rates had fallen further to 14%. However, these assessments of literacy were of the ‘Can you read?’ type – literacy being defined as something that people either had or had not. Coolahan (1977) warns that indices of literacy of this type are excessively generous and concludes that the standard of literacy was not high.

Studies of Irish literacy which asked the ‘How well do you read?’ question began in the 1960s. Prior to this there was an absence of empirical data in relation to Irish literacy standards contrasting with Britain where national surveys of reading in England and Wales were conducted by the Ministry of Education in 1948, 1952, 1956 and 1961 and by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in 1955 and 1960. These surveys established national standards in England and Wales and provided evidence that these standards were improving.

By contrast, the first Irish study which compared Irish and British literacy standards reflected poorly on literacy standards in Irish primary schools. As part of his study on bilingualism, McNamara (1961) compared the reading standards of pupils in fifth class in Dublin with that of their counterparts in England and Wales and found that the Irish pupils whose mother tongue was English were fifteen months behind their British counterparts. The results of this survey together with the lack of general empirical data on Irish literacy standards led to the setting up of the Teachers’ Study Group – a voluntary group of Dublin primary teachers.
The Teachers’ Study Group Surveys

The pioneering study of Irish literacy standards was conducted by the Teachers’ Study Group in 1964. Reading standards of eleven-year-old pupils in Dublin city primary schools were tested using the National Study 6 (NS6) – a test which had been used in British studies since 1955. The NS6 test was standardised on a Dublin population so that a base line could be established for comparisons in future surveys (Kelly, McGee, 1967). When the results of the Dublin pupils were compared with the results of pupils of similar age (10 years 9 months to 11 years 8 months) it was found that the Dublin pupils were twenty six months behind the English and Welsh pupils. When the study was replicated in 1969 it was found that there had been no significant change in standards in the intervening five years. However, when a third study was conducted in 1974 a significant improvement in test scores was found. Furthermore, when a fourth survey was conducted in 1979 it was found that a further improvement had taken place between 1974 and 1979. When a trend analysis of the four surveys was made it was found that the improvement in test performance between 1964 and 1979 occurred right across the range of ability. For instance, the percentage of high-scoring pupils rose from 16% in 1964 to 40% in 1979 while the percentage of low-scoring pupils fell from 15% in 1964 to 2% in 1979. Finally, when a comparison was made between Irish and British data it was found that the difference in favour of British pupils had fallen from ten points in 1964 to three points in 1979.

The fifth, and last, survey took place in 1984 and results indicated that the rise in standards which had begun in 1974 had begun to level out by 1984.

These Teachers’ Study Group surveys of Dublin City pupils were the main source of information on reading standards in the 1960s and the 1970s but in the early 1970s information began to be
available from a second source – the Department of Education National Surveys of Reading.

The National Assessments of Reading Achievement (NAER)

The Department of Education and Science (DES) carried out its first national assessment of reading in Ireland in 1972. Since then, there have been four other assessments. The assessments were carried out by the Curriculum Unit of the DES in collaboration with the Educational Research Centre.

The first three assessments used the NS6 (the test used by the Teachers’ Study Group) as the core test instrument but after the third assessment it was decided that an Irish test instrument should be developed. The new test was developed between 1989 and 1991, and it was called Tasks for the Assessment of Reading Attainment (TARA). TARA was developed with the intention of reflecting the most recent research findings on the nature of reading, and it was influenced by the test instruments used in international surveys of reading and literacy, especially the 1991 study of 9 and 14 year olds – International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The influence of the IEA study is seen in the use of TARA – the concept of reading domains. Both TARA and IEA used the same three domains of reading – Narrative Prose, Expository Prose and Documents.

TARA was first used in the 1993 NAER and again in 1998. Because TARA was the core test instrument used in 1993 and 1998, a direct comparison of performance between the two years was possible. Also, both NS6 and TARA were used in 1993 so that the first three assessments could be linked to subsequent ones for comparison purposes.

The results of the early surveys were strikingly similar to those of the Teachers’ Study Group surveys – significantly increased
scores were recorded between 1972 and 1980, but scores remained constant after 1980. The results of the 1993 and 1998 assessments indicate that standards remained stable over this five year interval. When these assessments are compared with earlier ones, it can be concluded that standards have not changed since 1980. When the performances of low achieving pupils are compared it can also be concluded that the proportion of low-achieving pupils has not changed significantly either.

The findings of Irish surveys can also be placed in the broader context of studies which compare the performances of Irish pupils and adults with the performances of pupils and adults in other countries. Ireland has taken part in two such studies – the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study in 1991 and the International Adult Literacy Study (1998).

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Reading Survey

Between 1989 and 1992 the IEA conducted a survey of reading literacy in thirty countries – including Ireland. Each country was responsible for collecting its own data from the survey and in Ireland data was collected from 122 primary and 151 secondary schools by the Educational Research Centre. The study focussed on 9 year olds and 14 year olds so the classes/grades surveyed were those in which most of these groups were located. In Ireland the majority of 9 year olds were in 3rd class while the majority of 14 year olds were in 2nd year of post primary.

Irish pupils in both populations were younger than their counterparts in most other countries and this age disparity may have put Ireland at a disadvantage in international comparisons. Elley (1992) estimated that if the scores had been adjusted to compensate
for age differences, the average scores of Irish pupils would be seven points higher for 9 years old and six points higher for 14 year olds. However, even if estimated age corrections were applied, the rank order of countries performance would not be greatly affected.

For the purpose of the IEA study, reading literacy was defined as the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued for the individual. Three domains of reading were identified for testing:

**Narrative Prose:** Continuous text telling a story

**Expository Prose:** Continuous text designed to describe, explain or otherwise convey factual information or opinion.

**Documents:** Structured information displays presented in the form of charts, tables, maps, graphs, lists or sets of instructions.

The testing instrument – Tasks for the Assessment of Reading (TARA) – developed in Ireland between 1989 and 1991 for use in national surveys was based on the domains of reading above.

Performance on the test was not described in levels – instead an international scale was created for each of the literacy domains for ranking. When Martin and Morgan (1994) published a comparative analysis of the results from an Irish perspective they identified three groups of countries for comparison with the Irish scores.
## Population A (9 year olds)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Countries with a significantly better mean score than Ireland)</td>
<td>(Countries with the same mean score as Ireland)</td>
<td>(Countries with a significantly lower mean score than Ireland)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>Cyprus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>(French speaking)</td>
<td>Trinidad and Tobago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>West Germany</td>
<td>(British Columbia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8 countries)</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>(7 countries)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(British Columbia)</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>East Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Slovenia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(11 countries)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Population B (14 year olds)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Countries with a significantly better mean score than Ireland)</td>
<td>(Countries with the same mean score as Ireland)</td>
<td>(Countries with a significantly lower mean score than Ireland)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>East Germany</td>
<td>Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Trinidad and Tobago</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>West Germany</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Phillipines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Botswana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>(9 countries)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
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<tr>
<td>(11 countries)</td>
<td>(10 countries)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to point out that it is possible for a country to have a high mean score and still have a large percentage of low-scoring pupils. For instance, an OECD report (1977) points out that New Zealand’s high achieving 14 year olds “raise the mean score even though a large proportion of the population is also underachieving”. However, Finland’s 14 year olds achieved the highest mean score with few pupils in the lowest-scoring band. The OECD report also points out that Ireland was one of the countries which had a markedly high proportion of low-achieving pupils (more than 20%).
A number of international reports of the IEA study have been published and because Ireland scores somewhere in the average range, Ireland is seldom referred to in these reports. An exception, however, relates to gender comparisons where Ireland is highlighted in Elley’s (1992) report. Among 9 year olds, girls scored better than boys in all countries (significantly better in 19 of the 27 countries) but among 14 year olds the gap in performance between boys and girls had narrowed. In some countries, for example the USA, however the gap in performance actually increased from 15 points among 9 year olds to 23 points among 14 year olds. Furthermore, the difference between 14 year old boys and 14 year old girls was even more pronounced among poor readers with three times as many boys as girls having reading difficulties.

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

The Green Paper on Education (1992) suggested that, while by traditional definitions the incidence of illiteracy was low, it was likely that a considerable number of Irish people “fall within the lower and middle ranges of literacy scales – who are unable to participate fully in the economic and civic life to today’s advanced nations”. The Green Paper also noted that reliable information on the incidence of such problems was not available in Ireland. Prompted mainly by these considerations the Department of Education and Science requested the Educational Research Centre to become involved in the IALS.

The IALS surveyed 20 countries over three cycles of data collection between 1994 and 1998. The definition of literacy used in this survey did not define literacy in terms of an arbitrary standard of reading performance. Rather, proficiency levels along a continuum were used to denote how well adults performed literacy tasks. Five levels of literacy were used to correspond to the measured range of scores achieved: Level I indicates persons with poor
skills; Level II respondents can deal only with material that is simple and clearly laid-out; Level III is considered a suitable minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life; Levels IV and V describe respondents who demonstrate command of higher-order information skills.

The key findings of the IALS survey were: In 14 out of the 20 countries, at least 15% of all adults were at Level I. The countries are: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

In six countries less than 15% of adults find themselves at the lowest level of literacy skills (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden) but even in the country with the highest score on the test (Sweden) 8% of the adult population have poor literacy skills.

Ireland is one of the countries that has more than 15% of adults with low literacy skills but it should be pointed out that all the English-speaking countries surveyed were also in this category and that the United Kingdom, the United States and Ireland had virtually identical proportions of adults with low literacy skills. Furthermore, all the evidence from the study suggests that countries with the highest literacy skills are those who have been successful in bolstering the literacy levels of their least advantaged pupils and that the high literacy standards of Nordic youths are largely attributable to a reduction in inequalities in those countries.

It would appear then that Ireland is one of those countries which has failed to reduce socio-economic inequality measured by the effect of parents education on literacy standards. In this regard it is worth quoting the following conclusion of the IALS report:
“Countries striving to reach the same mean literacy level as the Nordic countries could focus on efforts to reduce inequality in the range of literacy scores, for example, by raising the level of literacy of adults with a brief formal education and, particularly, of youth, from lower socio-economic backgrounds”.

Factors Contributing to differences in Achievement Levels

International studies of literacy performance also collect data relating to relevant causes of differences in achievement scores. The primary purpose is to offer advice to educational policy makers, planners and professionals on how standards might be improved. The IEA (1992) study, for instance, collected data on 22 policy indicators in relation to national achievement scores for 9 year olds. Factors included such variables as the starting age of reading instruction, pre-school enrolment rates, class size, school days per year, size of school library and time spent on teaching reading. Some interesting findings were revealed when the 10 highest-scoring countries and the 10 lowest-scoring countries were compared in relation to these indicators that show the complexity of findings and the danger of making simplistic judgements. For example, in relation to the findings concerning the age at which formal reading begins the data favours countries with an earlier start. Yet Finland, the highest scoring country along with Sweden, Norway and Iceland who were in the top ten countries do not begin reading instruction until age 7. However, when reading instruction begins in these countries it is not the abrupt step suggested by ‘the age at which formal reading begins’ but rather a further step on a journey well underway from pre-school and kindergarten. It should be remembered that a later start to the teaching of English in Ireland appeared to equate with lower standards of literacy.
Other findings that require a degree of caution are that school systems with a shorter school year and larger classes appear to do better. However, there is a well established body of research which suggests that the effect of reductions in class size depend on other factors such as the size of the reduction, the nature of instructional objectives and the characteristics of the learners. Glass et al (1982) suggest that variations in numbers above 20 appear to make little difference. Robinson and Witterbols (1986) conclude that small classes benefit certain circumstances such as early primary school and children of less than average intelligence. Finn and Achilles’ work in 1990 in the USA also supports reductions in class size for early childhood education.

Many findings are unsurprising, the percentage of students in preschools; more time spent on teaching reading and more hours of instruction per week all seemed to confer advantage. The most consistent finding relates to availability of books. Access to books in all settings – in the community, in a large school library, in a large classroom library, in a local library and to textbooks – is the most consistent predictor of success.

The effect of socio-economic background on literacy levels is also highlighted and it is suggested that:

“Difference in the literacy profiles of societies are apparent already in the pre-school period and that they increase during the year of formal schooling”.

The report also warns of the dangers of segregating pupils with a disadvantaged background from their more advantaged peers and argues that:

“Establishing a positive learning climate depends on having a nucleus of able students who have high expectations and are motivated to learn”.
There is also research from Irish sources that suggests that socio-economic status segregation is associated with poor reading performance. A survey of primary pupils in the counties of Limerick and Clare showed that reading problems were far higher among children who attended schools in the areas deemed to be disadvantaged (O’Connor, Ruddle and O’Gallagher, 1998) and a study of 4th class children in Dublin City showed that there were significant differences in reading attainment between the different socio-economic areas (Jeffers and Fitzgerald, 1991).

In Ireland, specific strategies have been put in place to combat educational disadvantage including the provision of extra teaching personnel and other resources. A particular initiative implemented in this regard is the ‘Breaking the Cycle’ project. Though ‘Breaking the Cycle’ has not yet been formally evaluated, early responses to this initiative are positive. It is essential that this initiative be reported on as part of any consideration of ways in which to raise literacy standards. A further development that requires evaluation in this context is the deployment of support teachers to some schools designated as disadvantaged.

Another factor worthy of comment is the professional development of teachers. Irish teachers were at the very bottom in terms of frequency of attendance at inservice courses in reading in the three years prior to the IEA Study (1992). Teachers in only three countries reported that they read articles on reading less frequently than Irish teachers. Significant associations are made between teacher reading and teaching styles – those who read more tend to teach in a way that emphasises the active, constructive nature of reading. Equally, research suggests that incareer education may enhance teacher commitment. Martin and Morgan (1994) argue, however, that these cannot be taken as a criticism of teachers, pointing out that structures for inservice are defective and that teacher access to appropriate journals and books is rather limited.
Postlethwaite and Ross (1992) also asked the question: “Which indicators are most important for differentiating between more effective and less effective schools?”. The answer that they found was that the indicators vary greatly from one country to another which suggests that a small number of factors cannot explain why some countries have higher national achievement that others. This points to a need to research a variety of issues relating to the primary school and literacy including school attendance, early childhood education, preservice and inservice education of teachers and parental involvement in education. It should, at the very least, caution against reaching hasty conclusions on the basis of simplistic comparisons.
CHAPTER 4

Remedial Education/Learning Support in Ireland

The Remedial Education/Learning Support Service is one of the ways the Irish education system responds to children who encounter difficulties with learning to read and write. This service dates back to 1963 when the first ex quota remedial teachers were appointed to teach small groups of children in Irish primary schools. Since then, the service has been gradually extended particularly in the last decade through the appointment of extra remedial teachers. Since September 1999 the service has been available to all primary schools with close to 1,480 (Department of Education and Science 2001) primary teachers currently deployed as remedial/learning support teachers. The term learning support is increasingly being used to denote remedial education.

However, despite the increased provision of remedial services national and international studies of reading achievement indicate that reading standards at primary level have not increased significantly during this time. Moreover, a significant number of children continue to leave primary education each year with serious problems in literacy and numeracy. This represents a major challenge to the teaching profession and raises issues surrounding provision for and the current organisation of the remedial/learning support service and how help is being delivered to children who are experiencing difficulties with learning to read and write.
Policy Development

The Department of Education and Science has published three major policy documents relating to remedial education. The first of these: Guidelines on Remedial Education (1988) deals exclusively with remedial education. The second, the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993) addresses remedial education as one of several aspects of special education. In November 1996 the Department of Education commissioned the Educational Research Centre to conduct a comprehensive study of remedial education in primary schools with the services of at least one officially sanctioned remedial teacher. The ERC was asked to pay particular attention to the ways in which the Guidelines on Remedial Education (1988) and the recommendations on remedial education in the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993) were being implemented in practice. The subsequent report, the Study of Remedial Education in Irish Primary Schools (1998) was the most comprehensive ever on Irish remedial education and the conclusions reached, represent a major challenge to the future operation, organisation and effectiveness of the remedial service in terms of opportunities for reform and renewal. In an attempt to clarify the issues arising, the Department of Education and Science, in May 1999, decided to re-examine and revise the 1988 Guidelines on Remedial Education. The Revised Guidelines termed the Learning Support guidelines were published in 2000. These revised guidelines will shape the future organisation of remedial education. In order to highlight the changes in emphasis, the term ‘learning support’ was used instead of ‘remedial education’. This change also reflected the situation in many schools where the term ‘learning support teacher’ is increasingly used to denote the expanded role of the ‘remedial teacher’.*

*In this publication the two terms are used interchangably
Another important study which contributed to the development of policy on remedial education/learning support was the INTO’s Report on Remedial Education (1994). This report examined and evaluated remedial provision and initiated a process of debate and discussion within the organisation, on matters relating to remedial education/learning support, in order to meet challenges and as professionals lead and guide developments.

Principles which underpin effective Remedial/Learning Support Programmes

Effective remedial/learning support programmes are based on the following underlying principles; prevention and early intervention, intensive intervention, whole school approaches including the involvement of parents, clear selection and assessment procedures, widespread provision of remedial/learning support teachers and effective professional development programmes for remedial/learning support and class teachers. All of the policy documents on remedial education/learning support in Ireland recognise the importance of these principles.

Prevention and Early Intervention

There is agreement that a preventative approach to reading difficulties is the most effective one. It is essential, therefore, that strategies and methodologies employed by teachers in the classroom are ones that have been shown to be the most effective. The Revised Curriculum is based on the most up to date research in effective language teaching for the modern world. There is also abundant evidence that children with reading difficulties in the early years of schooling are best served by the early introduction to remedial/learning support programmes that are offered on a one to one or small group basis for a fixed length of time.

This idea is not new in Irish policy on remedial education/learning support. The Remedial Guidelines (1988) stated that “a good remedial
programme should be a preventive one”. The INTO (1994) also stated that if remediation of learning problems does not take place in the first few years of a child’s school life, it is largely ineffective. *The Study of Remedial Education in Primary Schools* (1998) also reiterated the importance of early intervention stating that “the principles of prevention and early intervention should underpin remedial education and remedial teaching in English whether in oral language reading and or writing should be under way for those pupils who need such teaching by the beginning of first class”. *The Learning Support Guidelines* (2000) also stated that effective learning support should be based on the principle of intensive early intervention.

**Intensive Intervention**

Remedial/learning support teachers can only provide intensive intervention if it is related to the number of children they are expected to teach. The 1988 Guidelines did not give specific advice in relation to the actual number a remedial teacher should take as a caseload. Instead, the 1988 Guidelines stated that there are limits to the numbers of pupils and the range of tasks that the remedial teacher can cope with and that cognisance should be taken of this when selecting children. The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993) recommended that a caseload comprise of 40 pupils and that, where a remedial post is to provide a service to a cluster of schools, that the 40 pupils required be reduced by two for each school which is additional to the base school subject to a maximum reduction of 8 pupils. The figure of 40 was chosen as an initial figure until such time as all schools had access to a remedial service. The INTO (1994) indicated that the recommended caseload for a remedial teacher should be 30 pupils in a single school with a reduction of two pupils for each school in a cluster, in addition to the base school. The Learning Support Guidelines (2000) recommend that the remedial/learning support teacher should provide supplemen-
tary teaching to approximately 30 pupils at any given time during the school year.

Whole School Approaches

DES policy also recognises the importance of a whole school approach to dealing with literacy problems. The 1988 Guidelines recommended a whole school approach fully integrated into the general organisation of the school and its activities. It was also suggested that remedial/learning support teachers may assist class teachers to provide help within the class. The Learning Support Guidelines (2000) place even greater emphasis to the consultative/partnership role of the learning support teacher. An effective remedial/learning support programme will involve collaboration and consultation between the board of management, the principal teacher, the learning support teacher(s), the class teachers, parents and other professionals. Such collaboration will need to be deliberately and specifically planned.

Professional Development

The effectiveness of any educational programme lies in the expertise and professional skills of those delivering the programme. The INTO (1994) stressed the vital importance of teachers developing their knowledge and understanding of learning difficulties and enhancing their skills in teaching such children through professional development courses. The Study of Remedial Education in Irish Primary Schools (1999) also recognised that professional development for class teachers and remedial/learning support teachers is central to the success of a remedial/learning support programme.

Selection Procedures

The Guidelines on Remedial Education (1988) gave considerable
attention to the issue of selecting pupils for remedial teaching. Underlying those recommendations was a concern for pupils who were not achieving their potential. Learning difficulties were viewed as a gap between attainment and potential and, as remedial education seeks to close this gap, it was suggested that a sliding scale be used. The SERC Report (1993) recommended that the criterion for selection would be pupils who would score at or below the 10th percentile on standardised tests of basic literacy or numeracy, or perform at an equivalent level. This is one of the areas where the Study of Remedial Education in Irish Primary Schools (1998) found a direct discrepancy between policy as outlined in the 1988 Guidelines and practice and specifically recommended that this discrepancy be resolved. The Learning Support Guidelines (2000) recommend that the needs of pupils with low achievement should at all times be the particular focus of the learning support provision.

Duration

Another critical issue is the duration of remedial/learning support intervention. The practice of withdrawing pupils for their entire time in primary school was not encouraged in the 1988 Guidelines. This policy was supported by the 1998 study which recommended that the duration of remedial education should not exceed two to three years for the great majority of pupils. The Learning Support Guidelines (2000) recommend that if, after a number of terms of supplementary teaching, it is found that a pupil has made very little progress towards achieving the targets, a comprehensive review of the pupils’ needs should be undertaken. If the pupils difficulties are markedly unresponsive to supplementary teaching, consideration should be given in consultation with the pupils’ parents, to refer the child for psychological assessment. Pupils who continue to experience serious learning difficulties should receive, according to the policy documents, additional ongoing support, the nature of which would be
responsive to their changing learning needs as they move through the senior primary classes.

Home School Links

*The 1988 Guidelines on Remedial Education* stressed the importance of linking home and school. *SERC Report* (1993) recognised the valuable contribution which can be made by parents through their understanding and support for a pupil with remedial needs. Their involvement in the pupils programme should be actively encouraged by schools. *The Study of Remedial Education* (1998) also stressed the importance of parental involvement in reading and indicated that schools should be assisted in developing new initiatives for involving parents in reading programmes. *The Learning Support Guidelines* (2000) also emphasise the critical importance of collaboration and sharing of relevant information between teachers and parents.

Discrepancies between Policy and Practice

Research findings on remedial education reveal serious discrepancies between the recommendations and principles contained in the policy documents and practice (INTO, 1994, *Study of Remedial Education in Irish Primary Schools* [1998]). It is clear that there are serious barriers to the effective implementation of policy both at system level and at a professional level.

Barriers to Effective Implementation of Policy

A major deficiency in the remedial service has long been that in the past it has not been available in all schools. The *SERC Report* (1993) recommended that the remedial service should be extended to all national schools and since September 1999 all schools have gained access to remedial provision which is a very welcome policy development. However, while it is essential that all pupils should
have access to remedial provision it is important to state that there is little value in such provision unless it is effective. To be effective the intervention needs to occur earlier rather than later, be intensive, occur in small groups or individually on a daily basis and be available to all children who need it.

There is a significant difficulty getting places on sanctioned remedial education courses due primarily to a shortage of places at the two Dublin Colleges providing a course. The Department of Education and Science does not provide ongoing inservice training and support for remedial/learning support teachers which is cause for concern, though some remedial/learning support teachers attend professional development courses during their own time.

Some shared teachers are spending a considerable amount of time on excessive travel between schools and accommodation for shared teachers is frequently inadequate. Pupils receiving remedial education/learning support on a shared basis are receiving less support teaching than pupils in schools with a non-shared service. A majority of remedial/learning support teachers consider the annual remedial grant to be inadequate. Many schools do not have an overall written policy document on remedial education/learning support.

Overall, the 1998 study found that while pupils, in general, benefit from remedial teaching in English a considerable minority (mainly pupils with severe learning difficulties and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds) have needs beyond what can be met by the remedial service as it currently operates. The overall aims of remedial education/learning support and, consequently, the procedures teachers use for selecting pupils are unclear. A wide range of cut-off points for selection is used throughout the country and despite the recommendations contained in policy documents the duration of remedial/learning support teaching is exceeding four years for many pupils. Due to a number of factors the majority
of remedial/learning support teachers have very large caseloads. There is considerable variation in provision across schools with school size rather than need determining the proportion of pupils in receipt of remedial teaching. Remedial/learning support teachers spend little time in a consultative role and links between classroom teachers, principal teachers and remedial/learning support teachers are not well established. Consultation between remedial teachers and parents also needs to be further developed.

The large numbers of pupils which remedial/learning support teachers are expected to teach acts as a barrier to implementing intensive early intervention programmes. In practice, a significant number of remedial/learning support teachers are handling caseloads in excess of the recommended figures. Where remedial/learning support teachers are appointed on a shared basis there are particular problems relating to intensive interventions. The INTO (1994) found that while most schools appeared to withdraw between 25 – 40 children per week, a significant number of schools withdraw between 61 and 100 pupils per week. Similarly, the study of remedial education found that the average caseload of remedial/learning support teachers in a single school was 46 different pupils or 52 pupils when pupils in receipt of remedial teaching/learning support in both English and mathematics are counted twice. Shared remedial/learning support teachers (when English and mathematics are counted twice) have an average caseload of 55 pupils.

It must be realised by all, that remedial/learning support teachers who carry excessively large caseloads cannot respond effectively to the individual needs of very low achievers in the early years of schooling. They are thus limiting the effectiveness of remedial teaching or at least are prolonging its duration for some pupils. If the remedial/learning support teacher is to work intensively with a smaller number of children, it is reasonable to expect that a number of these could be successfully discontinued at the end of
a given period of time. It is only through caseload reduction that a more effective and intensive form of intervention can be implemented. It must also be stated that large caseloads hamper the consultative aspects of remedial provision, such as co-ordinating the identification of early leaning difficulties or advising class teachers about instructional programmes or learning materials.

Approaches to Remedial/Learning Support Education

Even though Department policy encourages remedial/learning support teachers to devote some of their time to working with teachers in the classroom, extra help for children encountering difficulties continues to be provided mainly by remedial teachers on a withdrawal basis. This practice has continued to form the major part of the remedial/learning support teacher’s role even though international research and DES policy warns specifically of the dangers of over using such an approach. Long term effectiveness is questionable and the difficulties encountered by the children tend to become chronic. The INTO (1994) found that the withdrawal of children from their regular classroom to receive remedial assistance is still the most popular organisational structure used by remedial/learning support teachers in their programmes. According to this survey only 5% of remedial/learning support teachers worked with class teachers in the classroom.

A further issue which emerged from the INTO Survey (1994) was the size of the groups which remedial/learning support teachers were withdrawing for intervention. The survey found that only 4% of teachers withdrew children on an individual basis. The study also found that, although the majority of teachers withdraw children in groups of mixed sizes, groups of between 4 and 6 children were most common. The current size of the groups might be examined so that the intensity of the intervention is not being diluted.
However, the size of groups may be indicative of the large numbers of pupils in particular schools who have learning difficulties. This possibility points to the need for the system to review provision levels on a regular basis and to make adjustments based on need. While it is essential that all pupils should have access to remedial provision it is important that such provision be effective.

Remedial/learning support teachers who operate on a shared basis, particularly those operating in a large cluster of schools are hampered in the delivery of intensive intervention. The Learning Support Guidelines (2000) contain a suggestion that the provision of remedial teaching be rotated between schools in a cluster so that pupils in the Junior classes in each school receive frequent (4-5 times per week) intensive supplementary teaching for a fixed period each year and additional indirect support from their learning support teacher outside of that period.

Professional Development

Since 1967 the Department of Education and Science has organised professional development courses for remedial/learning support teachers. Current provision comprises a one-year part-time course in St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, the Church of Ireland College, Rathmines, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, St. Angela’s College, Sligo, UCG and UCC. The INTO Survey (1994) indicated that the teachers who attended these courses were satisfied with the content of the courses. However, the Study of Remedial Education (1994) indicated that remedial/learning support teachers wishing to attend the one year part-time courses experience some difficulty in securing places. There is a particular shortage of places in the Dublin Colleges.

There is also a high level of dissatisfaction with the fact that there is no further structured incareer development provided for remedial /learning support teachers who have completed these initial
courses. Many remedial/learning support teachers, however, attend courses voluntarily during vacation time. The INTO since 1994 has run summer courses on various aspects of learning difficulties, particularly in relation to literacy and mathematics which are open to both remedial teachers and classroom teachers. Many remedial teachers also attend the annual conference of the Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA) – formerly the Association of Remedial Teachers of Ireland (ARTI). The Study of Remedial Education (1998) recommended that the Department of Education and Science should plan for and provide professional development and support to remedial/learning support teachers on an ongoing basis. The content of such training should be driven by policy development at national level and the needs of remedial/learning support teachers in their own schools. The training could be provided by colleges of education/university personnel, or by suitably qualified trainers or co-ordinators of remedial education.

Selection of Pupils

There are also discrepancies between the 1988 Guidelines and the SERC Report in relation to selection of pupils. The Learning Support Guidelines (2000) attempted to resolve this discrepancy by clarifying the goals of remedial education. One of the goals of remedial education is the provision of supplementary teaching to pupils with low achievement. It is envisaged that, in selecting pupils for supplementary teaching, priority should be given to pupils who are performing at or below the 10th percentile. However, schools may exercise flexibility in the deployment of remedial/learning support teachers so long as successful intervention is provided for the lowest achieving pupils. All teachers need to realise that there are limits to the number of pupils and the range of tasks with which the remedial/learning support teacher can cope. Schools, therefore, must develop effective and flexible selection strategies for remedial intervention as part of the school plan.
Duration of Remedial Education/Learning Support

Both the INTO (1994) and the Study of Remedial Education in Irish Primary Schools (1998) indicate that a significant number of children spend a considerable length of time attending the remedial teacher. The 1998 Study found that the duration of remedial teaching in English exceeds four years for a majority of pupils in receipt of remedial teaching. This is despite statements in the policy documents which indicate that this is not desirable. The Learning Support Guidelines (2000) attempt to resolve this issue. Where it is not possible to ‘discontinue’ a pupil from the remedial/learning support programme after two or at most three years, a comprehensive re-appraisal of his/her remedial programme should be undertaken.

Links with Parents

The Study of Remedial Education (1998) indicated strongly that in some cases the links between remedial/learning support teachers and parents of children in receipt of remedial teaching are not sufficiently strong to support the work of remedial/learning support teachers and to maximise its effects. Considering that the positive influence of parents on children’s success in learning to read and that the benefits of cooperation between parents and teachers are now well accepted this issue needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency by both the DES and individual schools in the context of school plans.

The Challenge of Change

The challenge for the teaching profession is to respond effectively to these discrepancies by examining critically, one’s own practice in relation to the current organisation of remedial/learning support in schools, including:
how intensive early intervention is provided;

how children are selected;

the number of children the remedial/learning support teacher provides support to;

the teaching approaches and methods used;

the current role of the remedial teacher;

how the whole school addresses the problem of children who are experiencing difficulties;

the development of whole school policies in relation to remedial/learning support programmes; and

the development of parental involvement in remedial/learning support reading programmes.

There is also a need for the Department of Education and Science at system level to:

examine the current criteria for allocating remedial/learning support teachers to schools; and

review the professional development needs of all teachers involved in combating literacy problems.
Strategies for Raising Standards

Any strategy for raising standards should take into account the fact that individual pupils are different. The way to higher standards, therefore, is through higher individual achievement for all students no matter where they are in the distribution of achievements. It was pointed out in an earlier part of this report that Ireland was one of the countries where literacy outcomes vary considerably by socio-economic status but that the absence of this disparity in some countries suggests that the problem can be addressed through policy. One of the approaches to raising standards in Ireland is the establishment of a range of innovative strategies and interventions for low-performing pupils – particularly those from disadvantaged areas.

Pre-School Programmes

The Head Start Programme was the first large scale intervention for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in the USA. Early evaluations of this programme were negative – it was found that early gains washed out after a number of years and the legacy of these evaluations even today casts doubt over the value of interventions of this type. However, Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) have produced evidence that interventions of this type can make an impact on the literacy of children from disadvantaged backgrounds but point out that some of these children will still need ‘second-chance’ remedial help later.
The evidence supplied by Snow et al. strongly suggests that an Irish pre-school programme which is intensive and of high-quality would ameliorate literacy problems in disadvantaged areas. In an Irish context the Rutland Street Project (1969) aimed at developing children’s cognitive skills in preparation for the work of the primary school. Initial results were positive. Children who had attended the preschool, particularly those whose initial achievements were low, made good progress in acquiring school related knowledge and skills. However, upon transferring to primary school they failed to keep pace with the achievements of children in the general population.

A follow-up study by Kelleghan and Greaney (1993) examined late educational careers, labour market experience, leisure activity and social deviance. This study found that participants in the Rutland Street preschool stayed at school longer, a higher proportion took public examinations and thus acquired qualifications on entering the labour force.

Preliminary results from the Early Start Programme are encouraging. Junior Infant teachers judged Early Start participants superior in cognitive and language abilities to non-early start pupils. They also judged them superior in adaptation to classroom procedures and readiness for school. “If Early Start pupils follow the same path as children in other studies who exhibited a range of personal advantages as a result of preschool experiences then we can expect success in school and life to be significantly better for Early Start children than for those living in similar low socio-economic status families that have not participated in Early Start or a similar preschool programme” (Final Evaluation Report).

Reading Recovery

The first widely-used programme based on one-to-one tutoring was Reading Recovery developed in New Zealand by Dame Marie
Clay in the 1970s and has since been implemented in a number of other countries including Australia, USA and, since 1992, Britain and Northern Ireland. *Reading Recovery* is a daily, one-to-one, 30 minute session conducted by a highly trained *Reading Recovery* teacher. Children are chosen for the programme when they have been in school for one year and when diagnostic reading tests have shown that they score in the lowest 20% of their peer group in terms of literacy abilities. Children continue with their sessions until they have reached the average literacy levels of their peers. For some children this takes up to 20 weeks of tuition but the average length of time is 14 weeks.

Early evaluations from different countries – Clay (1985) in New Zealand, Slavin (1987) in USA, Wright and Prance (1992) and OFSTED (1993) in Britain – indicate that *Reading Recovery* is a successful intervention programme. The OFSTED report states that the great majority of pupils who undergo the programme reach its objective of matching the average band of reading attainment in the classes from which they are drawn; and most maintain the gains they have made.

However, there has been criticism of the programme’s long-term effectiveness (Glynn, Crooks, Bethune, Ballard and Smith 1989) but a follow-up study in New Zealand and Australia of children who were between 10 and 12 years of age found that “*Reading Recovery* pupils do well in the long term; they have maintained their gains through their primary school education” (Wade and Moore, 1998).

**Success For All**

*Success for All* is one of the most widely implemented programmes in the USA. The programme which began in John Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, was first implemented in one school in Baltimore. By the 1998-1999 school year the
programme was in use in 1,100 schools in 45 states and had more than 500,000 participating pupils.

The programme is not based on any notion of potential. Its main premise is that all children can be helped to become competent readers during their primary school years. Pupils in this programme are regrouped for reading instruction based on reading levels rather than class level for 90 minutes per day and one-to-one tutoring is provided, where needed, for 20 minutes per day. Tutoring is provided for as long as the first grade pupils need it and the tutoring is completely integrated with the reading programme used by the classroom teacher. Because Success for All is designed specifically for schools serving large numbers of disadvantaged pupils a family support team is involved. This team consists of the home-school liaison teacher, the school vice-principal and the school counsellor.

Evaluations of the programme have found that it increased pupil reading performance. For instance Spear-Swerling and Steruberg (1996) regard the programme as being “very impressive” but point out that it is expensive to implement.

Restructured Chapter I?

This restructuring of the traditional remedial programme in the USA took account of criticism of the initial programme in that it placed too much emphasis on isolated skills. The content was altered to reflect the perceived need for instructional content which emphasised meaningful, connected reading. One-to-one tutoring is not a feature of this programme. The pupils are taken in groups of three for 30 minutes per day and the extra tuition lasts for most of the school year.

An evaluation of the programme by Hiebert et al. (1994) found that the children in the programme had reached the average level of
pupils in their classes. The apparent success of early intervention programmes such as, *Success for All, Reading Recovery* and *Restructured Chapter I* indicate that similar programmes could be developed in Ireland to address effectively the literacy needs of at-risk pupils.

**Parental Involvement Programmes**

Two early projects in this area – the *Haringey Reading Project* and the *Belfield Reading Project* – were conducted in Britain and shortly afterwards Paired/Shared Reading became popular. Since then a number of variations on the earlier models have been developed. These would include: *Pause, Prompt and Praise, Children and Parents Enjoy Reading (CAPER), Cued Spelling* and *Paired Writing*.

Evaluations of the Paired/Shared Reading-type programmes have been generally positive. For instance, Topping’s (1996) results suggested that these programmes led to short and long term benefits in terms of reading achievement.

**Summary**

It is an unrealistic expectation that there are simple remedies for raising reading standards because countless factors can have an important bearing on reading standards. Strategies for raising standards must take individual differences into account and seek to improve individual performance of all pupils. Socio-economic conditions in Ireland seem to have produced a sizeable minority of pupils who find it hard to learn to read – even when they receive traditional remedial help. Other countries have attempted to solve problems which are similar to Ireland’s by introducing innovative interventions. Pre-school programmes, early primary school interventions and parental involvement projects have all produced evidence of long-term effectiveness.
However, a note of caution must be entered at this point. It is surely naive to expect that early, however intensive, intervention will rectify all children’s reading difficulties on a once and for all basis. Snow et al (1998) point out that it is nothing short of foolhardy to make enormous investments in remedial instruction and then return children to classroom instruction that will not serve to maintain the gains they have made in the remedial programme. It is clear that some changes in both the mainstream and remedial/learning support classrooms are necessary to support progress.
A Snapshot of Current Practice

It has been said that there is no one method, medium, approach or philosophy that holds the key to the process of learning to read. From this it follows that the greater the range and variety of methods known to teachers, the more likely it is that teachers will feel competent to provide appropriate help for children who experience difficulties.

Gillet and Bernard (1989:16) have commented: “Research and our own experience suggests that the approach which is successful with all children is one which combines features of a number of different approaches and is adapted to a child’s individual needs.”

To that end it is hoped that the contributions made by the teachers in this part of the publication will stimulate self-reflection on current teaching methods, while also highlighting the richness of practice which exists among the teaching profession. By sharing with others the strategies that work most successfully for teachers in a broad range of settings, it is hoped to paint a rich tableau of current practice.

Immediately after the 1999 Education Conference at which literacy was discussed, a number of teachers were invited to make submissions on their approaches to literacy. This section of the report contains a compilation of the submissions subsequently received. The approaches described, vary widely, from the teacher who uses a reading mascot to a teacher who promotes literacy through the use of real books. Though wide ranging common themes emerge. It also emphasises the importance of real or rele-
vant books for the child, the role of parents in the learning process and the importance of phonemic awareness. Teachers also describe how the use of drama, games and technology are powerful tools for the successful teaching of literacy.

**Early Reading Experiences Incorporating Parental Involvement**

The writer of this piece teaches in a country school in West Cork. There are six teachers in the school and she teaches Junior and Senior Infants. She has been teaching for twelve years. This teacher advocates a combination of approaches, parental involvement, learning through play and careful monitoring of each child's progress. For children to grow up to be real readers the printed word should, she believes, speak to them right from the beginning. Reading should be seen as an exciting process to which the child brings his/her own ideas, thoughts, feelings, imagination and knowledge of life.

These are some of the activities that this teacher has used with her Junior and Senior Infant classes.

These are three activities I use to motivate children to become readers themselves. I base the reading lesson on the child’s own personal experiences, thus making it meaningful to the child. I actively involve the parents of the children in coming up with the source material for their ‘books’ and the approach also encourages parents to listen to their children read at home.

- I ask parents to fill out a diary for a weekend consisting of a variety of activities that their children did for the weekend. After discussion with each child we make a very simple book based on the information given. Children draw suitable pictures and dictate a caption for me to write underneath. I mix up the pictures for the child to put back in sequence and
then the book can be used both for shared reading in class and at home.

- I also ask the children to bring in their baby albums or a series of baby pictures. We compose and write suitable captions and use the book as a reader.

- We use photographs of children involved in activities to make a sheet of newspaper about every child. We discuss what is happening in the photograph and reach an agreement on a headline and article. Children take home their own personal newspaper for their parents to read with them. They also take home friends’ newspapers which is a good way for parents of Junior Infant children to get to know their child’s new friends.

Learning through Play

Moving on from those very beginning personal experiences children are encouraged to become aware of environmental print. The following activities are designed to enable children to read what is around them:

- A series of instruction cards pasted up on the classroom door each morning indicating what the children are to begin the day with. A different instruction set may be pasted up after lunch breaks.

- On our no-uniform day (which is a termly fund-raising event) children are encouraged to wear clothes which incorporate words or captions as part of their design. On the day children ‘read’ each others clothes.

- I take the children on a word walk in the local area. We go on a short walk and copy down some of the words we see. Back in the classroom we draw a simple map of our walk and put in the signs in their correct places. Children are greatly encouraged by this activity as they can show off their reading to Mammy and Daddy.
Monitoring Early Progress

Monitoring the progress of a diverse range of readers in a multi-class is a constant challenge for me. I use a system called a reading diary, which involves the child, the parents and me in recording and assessing reading progress. The reading diary is a scrapbook which includes a shared record of reading readiness, simple book reviews by the child, lists of favourite books, comment sheets for a shared reading project, word sheets for class readers and certificates of completion for class readers.
A READING BUDDY – ASSISTED PRACTICE IN LITERACY
(HOW PARENTAL COLLABORATION CAN LEAD TO PEER COLLABORATION)

The writer of this submission is Mary Fitzgerald, Principal, St. Saviour’s NS, Waterford. In her piece, Mary emphasises the importance of collaboration with others in the teaching of reading.

My interest in and commitment to the practice of peer collaboration goes back to an experience I had a few years ago. After many years teaching in Middle and Senior Classes I found myself teaching Junior Infants and right back at the beginnings of pre-reading and early literacy. I noticed the different rates of progress made by individual children. When I moved with my class to Senior Infants it became obvious that for some children reading was a complex activity and were starting to lag behind while other children were already up and running. By the end of the year, I felt that the end of Senior Infants and the beginning of First Standard was a critical time and a make-or-break stage for the fledgling reader. If the child didn’t keep up, confidence was lost and so too was the spark to try. How could I meet the needs of all my fledgling readers who were all at such different stages along the road to literacy?

As I was pondering this conundrum, an article by Keith Topping was published in Child Education (December, 1984) on the topic of Paired Reading. It outlined a new technique through which parents could help their children with reading at home and which didn’t conflict with methods used at school. It sounded positive and straight-forward with encouraging outcomes. Evaluation studies showed that children involved in paired reading commonly made two or three times the normal progress. These results from the Kirklees Paired Reading Project included many inner-city areas with so called ‘disadvantaged’ families. I was immediately interested. My particular school is a large coeducational urban primary school, set in a predominately working class area
and was experiencing high unemployment at this time. The school was designated by the DES as disadvantaged. The school was established in 1975 and today serves approximately 460 children. In addition, it also caters for 50 children of the travelling community.

I began my endeavour with parental involvement and found that the level of interest was high and the commitment worthwhile. Paired reading enables parents to become involved in their children’s education and empowers teachers to guide parents in helping to *accelerate* the reading ability of their children. It also helps solve the problem for the teacher in dealing with children at different stages of development. Reading of course is the key to independent learning right across the curriculum and the keystone for *lifelong learning*. We want reading to continue when the teaching has stopped! What happens in the classroom must translate into the real world. Real books will give a child a love of reading whereas a school series alone will restrict their choice. With paired reading, there are no limits placed on choice, range and genre of book. If the level and reading age are appropriate, children make the selection and set the pace themselves quite satisfactorily. They feel an ownership of the process thus enhancing their motivation. Parents like the home-school link and can effectively see a steady progression.

The Approach Required

Paired reading should not supplant the school series and structured approach to the teaching of reading. This technique is a **parallel strategy to a prescribed text** and requires a different approach from teachers and more significantly, from parents. It can be compared to the icing on the cake after the initial foundation has been laid with the structured school series.
Paired reading has **two phases**. The first is called 'reading together' and is in practice *literally* that – with parent and child reading aloud in harmony. The parent adjusts the speed so that the pair is in unison, establishing their own sense of rhythm/pace. If the child misses a word, the parent steps in after a few seconds and pronounces the word for the child while pointing to the difficult word. The child then repeats it and the pair continue so that meaning and context are not lost. There is no breaking words up, no nagging and no fussing about errors. The advice of ‘a little and often’ ensures that the child is interested and fresh and that the experience stays positive and relaxed. Praise is the reward and because the child *chooses* the book, the level of motivation is high. Parent and child have a shared purpose.

As the child becomes more competent, the second phase of paired reading comes into play. This is ‘reading alone’. When the child feels confident enough to try reading without the parent, a signal is passed – a nudge, a cue or a rap on the table to indicate that the child wants to go solo. The parent immediately stays silent and the child carries on reading aloud. If the child stumbles or fails to read a word, the parent again demonstrates the correct word and, if a phrase or sentence causes difficulty, the pair resume reading aloud in tandem. Reading together carries on until the child's confidence is restored whereupon s/he signals once again for unassisted practice.

**Advantages**

*Quality and Quantity*

The advantages of Paired Reading are immediately evident. Firstly, its aim is to be an enjoyable, positive, shared-experience for parent and child; *quality time* in other words. Nonetheless, it greatly increases the speed at which children get through books and the *quantity* of books read. Children learn to read by reading so the increased exposure to print is beneficial as the volume of
reading practice goes up. In addition, reading for meaning is a key aspect. Paired reading gives flow and continuity. The emphasis is on extracting the message/story from text, which is what reading is basically all about.

Resources

The first imperative is an abundance of books at suitable levels of reading ability for every child, ranging from the child who needs to be stretched to the child who needs to be wooed to the printed word. Fortunately, there is now a move towards real books by the childrens' publishers and so there is greater choice now. *Sunshine Spiral Starters* and other such publications have paved the way for Irish real books and they really are very effective moving from picture book to one-word, to one phrase or sentence, on to one page and gradually on to one chapter. Confidence is enhanced and this is the key to success. The children *feel* that they are readers.

In addition, with readily available reading diaries the child can see and chart his/her own progress. Soon, a page is filled in the diary and a merit sticker underscores the achievement. By the end of a term, the children are proudly boasting of the numbers of books read or levels reached. This is true of the weaker pupils who read away at their own pace and can justifiably boast of equal numbers of books read – a child will not disengage if they see their own progression. We only give up when we sense failure or lack of hope. At the end of the year a merit certificate is just reward for all concerned and parents are invited back to share the award-giving ceremony. The total numbers of books read can be quite staggering e.g. 80-100 in First Standard, and it is heart warming to share a sense of achievement with the parents and their children. It usually sets the scene for the following year too. Parents become hooked as well.
Because the busy teacher in the classroom has so much else to do, the reading diaries are a boon. It is the parent/s who fill in the record each night by putting in the date, title of book and their comments pertaining to the activity, e.g. Whether the book was suitable or not; the success or not of the choice of book; the reason the book was such a hit with that individual child, etc. At the end of the week or month, teacher has a tangible record of progress in literacy as well as invaluable insights into the reading likes or dislikes of each pupil plus the level of home support. My experience is that it is rare for parents not to want the best for their child. By allowing for occasional lapses due to a new baby, etc., they usually pick up the reins again especially if you manage to support the child in the meantime and keep the books going home. I would never penalise a child for what is outside their control. There is always someone else to be found in the family/community if needs be to maintain the process. Dads are often the favourite cheerleader in this type of activity and it is well acknowledged that they have a fun loving, humourous interaction with young children which is being increasingly valued by child development experts. With the worries about gender difference and the perception of boys as reluctant readers, I maintain that the father as role model is significant here.

A Reading Buddy

The most rewarding aspect for me in promoting Paired Reading was that in the second year with the same children, I could see their love of books and of the library. They literally took off by themselves. Because they were such confident readers and were used to reading to an audience, they were now able to listen to each other read and even better if someone faltered they would automatically step in and help. They were able to use the same methods practiced on them at home! I became intrigued and watched their interactions. It became an eye opener! Listening in this context was not a passive activity. I then asked them to read
their book each morning to each other in turns. They were able to read, correct and support each other in a turn-taking exercise with no squabbles or criticisms or put-downs. I became redundant in a sense as they automatically enlisted each other’s help. A sense of capability and autonomy was apparent. Soon, I could count on twenty minutes uninterrupted time to help a new pupil settle in and catch up. If someone entered the classroom, they were too engrossed to notice and I was often asked about their 'quiet yet busy' activity. There was a sense of purpose and enjoyment about these pupils and I captured it on video just to remind myself of what could be achieved at even the emergent reading stage. My pupils were between 6-7 years and had experienced two years of Paired Reading. I would recommend trying out this approach to any teacher interested in promoting literacy in a school or community. I believe it has huge implications for independent learning by pupils in pairs or triads and would enhance group activities in Science and all other subject areas. It engenders a collaborative approach and this is in keeping with the latest theories and good educational practice. Common sense alone indicates that we are social beings and according to Vygotsky:

“What the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow”.

The move away from rigid theories that emphasise one single strategy or approach is important. We too as teachers are apprentices in the quest for more knowledge and understanding of how our pupils learn or acquire skills. The significance of organizing activities in the learning process that actively engage children in constructing their own understanding is the everlasting bequest of Jean Piaget. It remains undoubtedly a major challenge! The real revolution in the teaching of reading is the realization that reading is something that children have to do for themselves. They are active learners and no longer passive as if reading is something that can be done to or for them. We must stop drilling and grilling
our young readers as if learning to read was solely a decoding a task. Let’s do reading for real!

The potential of Information Technology in the classroom is well documented and children benefit enormously from it. It is a particularly useful tool for these children who sometimes experience difficulty.

**Talking Computers**

This piece written by Tomás O’Gormain, principal of Scoil Iosagáin, Aghada, Midleton, Co Cork and Cathaoirleach of GMROC (East Cork Primary Teachers’ Computer-Study Group), describes an approach teachers in East Cork have been investigating which has been designed to help pupils experiencing learning difficulties – The Somerset Talking Computer Project.

The Talking Computer Project takes the best of traditional materials and methodology and marries these to a brand new approach to reading and related literacy skills, teaching through using computers. By using a speaking Wordprocessor – *Talking PenDown* in this instance – and specially chosen phonic blocks of text, the pupil experiences a multi-sensory approach to the various elements of literacy – reading, writing (typing), spelling, etc using Information Technology. The computer gives an instant speech feedback to a letter, a word, a sentence or a specified block of text, thus enabling the pupil correct mistakes immediately. The materials required if one wishes to follow this programme can be purchased from Longman Logotron and Somerset Education Services and consists of a manual containing the Phonic Blocks of text, teaching instructions, and results of research carried out in Somerset schools where the materials were first piloted. Also required is the software package *Talking PenDown* produced by Longman Logotron, Cambridge, UK. Suppliers of educational hardware and software should be able to provide these materials.
The Somerset Talking Computer Project — Background:

In May 1991 an educational psychologist in the Somerset Education Services, Martin Miles, and an advisory teacher for the Information Technology and Special Needs, Mike Bolton, developed the idea of using the technology already available in primary schools to help children experiencing learning difficulties — particularly in reading. Over a six months period their idea was directed along a certain path in keeping with their then most pressing concerns – the growing number of pupils being identified with specific learning difficulties and/or dyslexic type tendencies.

As education was moving inexorably into an age of technology, there seemed to be a need to investigate the various possibilities offered by computers in order to help children experiencing problems in the general area of literacy.

Marti’ns and Mike’s ideas were to try to do something with the computer equipment that was already available in their schools and to adapt programs and software in the area of special needs. The concept of a wordprocessor giving an instant speech feedback from the computer when wordprocessing, they believed, should provide better cues for the correction of writing, reading and spelling. Incorporating speech with wordprocessing would be moving further towards a multi-sensory approach using information technology.

The Talking Computer Project concentrated on using Talking PenDown as a tool to remediate learning deficits related to literacy, in conjunction with a pack of reading cards which were designed with a phonic development as their base. By using the cards – (which had been compiled after much investigation of phonic programmes already in existence) – in conjunction with a computer program having an instant feedback speech facility (such as Talking PenDown) the project team believed that they were developing an early intervention remedial approach to literacy problems in their school.
The objective was that this remedial work would take children to a literacy level from which they could advance and take control of their own learning situations using IT; they would move from a highly controlled situation to a low control situation in which they were in charge of their own learning, and could move on to joining mainstream texts and wordprocessors. It was hoped that the drudgery of ‘Drill and Kill’ would be overcome by the motivation inspired by the computer, the fascination of the speech, the boost to their self-esteem, and the feeling by the pupils that they were making positive progress.

This highly structured programme, based on a tried and tested traditional methodology now interfacing with the power of the computer, was piloted in Somerset schools over a period of twelve months, with pupils in all phases of education in an age range from 7 to 16 years. During that year the project produced some remarkable results.

**Initial Piloting Results**
(taken from the Project Manual):

(a) Reading ages – increases of up to 37 months with the average increase being 10.6.

(b) Spelling ages – increases of up to 12 months.

(c) Short term auditory memory – increases of up to 12 months.

(d) Teacher observed – increases in concentration; increases in time spent on task; changes in attitude (for the better); increases in self-esteem, and transferability of skills to other areas of the curriculum.

The extraordinary thing about the above results is that they were achieved in little over 6 hours tuition, i.e. 20 minutes a day over 4 weeks. Follow-up testing at 10 weeks and again at 6 months indicated that progress had been maintained even after the withdrawal of the speaking wordprocessor.
GMROC’s Interest in the Project:

In March, 1995, two delegates from GMROC (East Cork Primary Teachers’ Computer-Study Group based in Scoil Chlochair Mhuire, Carrigtwohill) attended the MAPE Annual Conference in Bath College of Higher Education at which the Somerset Project was demonstrated by one of its producers Mr Mike Bolton. (MAPE – Micros and Primary Education – is the equivalent of the CESI Annual Conference held in Dublin every November and consists mainly of presentations and demonstrations on the use of IT in education). The Cork delegates were so impressed by the presentation that a decision was taken at a meeting of the group to undertake research in some local primary schools and to ascertain for ourselves the value of the project in the context of Irish schools. Our aim was to check if the talking computer project could significantly help pupils in our schools who are experiencing literacy difficulties especially in reading skills.

A number of group members undertook to purchase the project materials and to test the claims, among pupils experiencing learning difficulties in their schools. Thirty pupils in all were given access to the materials in 8 – 10 schools in Cork East and in one City school. This research (or perhaps more correctly ‘investigation’) is ongoing and initial indications are that pupils exposed to the project made significant progress in reading ability in the vast majority of cases. The following example from one school speaks for itself.

Sample — School

Seven 6th class pupils were selected for the study. These pupils had been receiving remedial help 2/3 times a week prior to entering 6th class when remedial help was discontinued in accordance with school policy.
Five of those were boys and two were girls. The results were quite remarkable. The average improvement in the spelling age for those pupils was seven months. In the case of the pupil who made the most dramatic improvement, family circumstances and interest in school work also improved significantly.

The project has just been completed with six pupils from Standard 4 in the same school and again the results are very encouraging although not as dramatic as was Sample 1. The Marino Test was used with this group and the average improvement in the RA was 5 months.

It would seem from the early results being returned that senior class pupils made greater progress than junior class pupils although this hypothesis has not been thoroughly tested.

**Operating Procedure — Talking Computer Project:**

1. The project works on a one to one basis only and each session lasts about 20 minutes.

2. Teacher shows the sentence on a card to a pupil who reads it 3 times – with help if needed.

3. Pupil says the sentence from memory – card hidden.

4. Pupil types the sentence – words been spoken by the computer.

5. Pupil checks with card for accuracy of typed sentence. (Correct if necessary).

6. Letter patterns are identified by pupil.

7. Pupil repeats the procedure with the next sentence.

8. At the end of the card the pupil reads all four sentences and identifies the letter patterns.

9. Two cards in each 20 minute session would be a good average.
Progress should be monitored and the pupils involvement in this will help act as reinforcement. It is also suggested that morning time is best when the pupil is more receptive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupil</th>
<th>Reading Age (Before Project, June ‘95)</th>
<th>Reading Age (After Project, March ‘96)</th>
<th>Improvement yrs–months</th>
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Average improvement = 2 years, 3 months.

The Micra-T Level 3 (Fallons) was used in the testing. While this research was not conducted strictly according to scientific criteria, particularly in regard to testing (to avoid familiarity with this test the June result was used and the time which elapsed was added on to then RA) nevertheless, the results in most of these cases are so dramatic that one must conclude that the use of Somerset Project played a significant part in the vast improvement in reading age.

Sample Card
It is too dark to march.
The dog will bark in the yard.
There is a mark on my scarf.
Park the car on the farm.
Benefits of using the project materials

1. It is highly motivating. Children seem fascinated with the speech as a reaction to their input.

2. The project can be operated efficiently by non-teaching personnel – school secretary, classroom assistant, a parent or an older pupil. Once the project is set up and the procedure understood no special expertise is required. This is very important in a school situation as a one to one approach by the class teacher would not be possible.

3. Additional work can be assigned by the class-teacher if proper monitoring procedures are followed.

4. Encourages a multi-sensory approach with aural, visual and kinesthetic input and output. Children feel that they are doing a practical activity rather than an academic one.

5. In addition to the project being highly motivating, children were extremely disappointed when the project was concluded. The obvious stigma of the ‘slow learner’ was not perceived as such.

6. From the point of view of the teacher the project material is highly structured and is easily monitored.

7. The pupil quickly acquires keyboard skills. (The fact that older pupils seem to make greater progress than younger pupils may have a bearing on their level of skill in this area.)

8. In many cases teachers found total attitude change to reading and writing skills; improved concentration; greater ability to complete tasks; improved self-esteem and greater all round interest in language learning, generally.

9. Teachers’ satisfaction that pupils with reading problems in their classes were being actively helped increased.
Drawbacks of the Talking Computer Project

(1) The one to one nature of the project – lack of time to operate such a project during ordinary school without the help of an ‘assistant’.

(2) Cost of the materials.

(3) Confined to Acorn RISC OS Computers.

(4) Lack of computers and people with computer skills in some schools.

(5) The speech synthesizer is not the most sophisticated available and for Irish children the accent of the voice can be difficult to understand. (The speed, volume, pitch and length of pauses can be altered in the speech facility by an experienced operator.) The majority of children had no difficulty with this aspect of the project.

(6) Continuity – A commitment to the project is required by both the teacher and the pupil. Long ‘lay-offs’ will inhibit progress.

Summary of Findings by GMROC on the Somerset Talking Computer Project

The aim of GMROC initially was to discover if the Somerset TCP could significantly help pupils in our schools who were experiencing literacy difficulties. Our investigation of the project was carried out by us as practising teachers and not strictly according to scientific criteria. All group members who tried out the materials were in agreement that the project did indeed contribute significantly to improvements made by pupils who were exposed to the project. Senior pupils made the greater progress. A follow up study would be necessary to see if this progress was maintained beyond the duration of the project. A number of pupils who had made very little progress using conventional methods in their
remedial class made outstanding progress using TCP materials. The motivation of using a computer obviously had a bearing on their success.

Questions on how pupils undergoing similar intensive tuition, but not using technology, might progress, also needs to be investigated.

**Teaching Of Reading – What Has Worked For Me**

The writer of the following piece did not wish to be specifically identified but the teaching context is a mixed Junior School (Junior Infants to Second Class, Co-Ed) and the writer has 26 years teaching experience.

When I began thinking about this topic, I found it extremely difficult to define just what it was that had proved successful for me in the context of the teaching of reading over the years. I suppose I have really used a variety of approaches and styles at different times and with differing results. I will outline below some of the strategies I have used with varying success.

A Print Rich Environment

First and foremost I always try to provide an environment that is conducive to reading. Books would be very much part of my classroom set-up. If for instance, we were exploring a topic in nature study I would display books about the topic as an indication that this is where one might find out more.

On each table I have a basket of books (rotated weekly from table to table). The idea is that when children are finished their work they can take a book to read or to look at. There is no excuse for “what will I do now teacher?”. The assumption is that if there are books supplied, then one can’t ever be bored. Children also
become interested in books that their friends at the table find interesting. I provide non-fiction in the baskets also as many children are attracted to the pictures of wildlife and will want to read the captions underneath.

I try to display books in an attractive way so that children will be encouraged to read. A corner with cushions or bright coloured chairs is a good incentive. I am determined next year to buy a really decent book shelf or wire display unit for all classrooms.

The CAPER Scheme

For about fifteen years we have run the CAPER (Children and Parents Enjoy Reading) scheme in our school. We have never evaluated the benefits in any scientific way but it certainly seems to have produced a reading culture within the school. We try to ensure that the books provided are the very best in children’s literature and we have invested a lot of money in setting up the scheme.

In the early days, we were perhaps too caught up in ensuring that we monitored which books had been read and in noting the comments written by the parents. In more recent times we have focused on the enjoyment, which is central to the scheme and have taken away the burden of parental reporting. It is enough if the child has taken a book home and gained some pleasure from it.

I have found that children are always enthusiastic to take home a book that I have read to them in school. Even the most reluctant of readers wants the book that teacher had. So it is important to read the books in class. I try to read from a wide variety of authors and so give them the best experience of books.
Talking about Books

In our school we often have ‘talk about book’ sessions, e.g., circle time is useful for this. For events like Children’s Book Week pupils will talk on the intercom to the school about books they have read, or they interview each other about books.

From time to time we have a whole-school Drop Everything and Read session. Children are asked in advance to choose a book that they would like to read and to have it to hand. At a signal the whole school begins to read – teachers, secretary, principal, caretaker etc. In the beginning the children are amused to see the teacher reading a novel (with one eye on the class of course) but they become very used to it.

Writing Books for others to read

I have had great results from second class writing books for the Junior Infants and reading books to them. Even weak readers at second class feel that they are competent enough to produce materials for younger children. I have had groups of children collaborate on a storyline for Big Books. They write the story, paint the illustrations, type up the text and enlarge it and then read the finished product for the infants.

Teaching Sight Vocabulary at Infant level

At infant level when teaching sight vocabulary I involve the children in ‘hands on’ games. They handle the flashcards and become ‘human sentences.’ I do a lot of playing about with the words, e.g. children swopping places to see if the sentence makes sense, substituting other words etc. Making funny sentences is also useful. Children have a sense of the ridiculous and enjoy the fun element in playing with words. I make out flashcards with their names on them so that any sentence about Huggy Bear can become a sentence about Julie or John or Natalie.
Using the Reading Scheme

I use the reading scheme as the starting off point. Children gain confidence about reading in that they bring the book home when I am sure that they will be able to tackle it with ease. They will have become so familiar with the sight vocabulary through the games (above) that they will have no problem in reading the book. They will suddenly realise that yes they can read! Having had this success they are then encouraged to broaden out with a wide range of support reading.

Personalising the Reading Scheme

I often take a story that the children can read from the reading scheme and re-type it, inserting the children’s own names in the story. They think this is great fun and are encouraged to read about themselves.

Functional Reading

It’s surprising how much infants already recognise through logos etc. I often bring in familiar food packaging and ask children the names of the products. They invariably know from the labels etc. It is useful to point out the writing to them as a further means of identification.

I find it useful to ‘steal’ the odd children’s menu, enlarge it and put it up in the play corner. Children will love ordering from a real menu. In the play corner, I also put up signs that have meaning, e.g. *Wait here for the doctor/No smoking in this restaurant/Please sign your name here* etc.

Newspapers, magazines and catalogues are useful sources for reading material. An alphabet frieze can be made from pictures in magazines e.g. of food, or toys.
Writing Letters

I have found that if I write a simple letter to the class and display it then everyone is very interested in reading it. I use vocabulary they will recognise and throw in the odd drawing to help them along. Senior Infants and older children can make an attempt to write back. A display of useful words can build up gradually in the writing corner.

Language Experience

I write news on class language experience charts and later type it up and photocopy it for everyone. Children will very quickly read the sentence which applies to them. A little book can be made. If collected over the year they are a good record of all the year’s events.

Reading Their Own Stories

By typing up their own stories on computer children can present a well finished product (with illustration or computer graphics) that the others in the class will want to read.

Informing Parents

Encouraging parents to become involved in reading to their children is perhaps the key to reading. At our meetings in September we emphasise the importance of reading to the child and of the tactics they should use when the child starts to read him/herself e.g. don’t insist on the child sounding out the word etc.
DRAMA AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

This submission highlights how drama might be used to encourage literacy development. It is written by a teacher who teaches in a 12 teacher all boys’ school in a small provincial town in the south east of Ireland.

The class I am teaching is a third class. There are 31 pupils in the class and their academic ability varies considerably. The pupils are from a mixed socio-economic background and some would have serious behavioural problems.

I first used ‘Drama’ in the primary school during the Buntús years. I discovered early that children were natural actors. Many years ago I tried using this approach in the teaching of English and I haven’t looked back since. It has developed over the years, so much so, that one could argue that it is a highly integrated approach to the development of literacy. It incorporates reading, oral language, comprehension, debate, and listening skills.

Children’s play is very important. It is thought by many educationalists that the fundamental building blocks of cognitive development are laid during play in the early years. In my view drama and play are closely associated.

The type of drama we are most familiar with is the type we see in the theatre, television, the cinema, and video. Often in schools this is the main type of drama encountered. This type of drama is, of course, very useful and can help greatly in pupil development. Another type of drama is the one that occurs incidentally in day to day teaching. I have developed a style of drama that encompasses both approaches. I use for example stories from books (be it History or English) or a story a pupil may have written or heard. The pupils are encouraged to add dialogue, ideas or change ‘script’ in any way they see fit. Class discussions are held regularly where characters are discussed, plots suggested and solutions to
problems ventured. One ‘rule’ is that everyone in the class has the same stature, and can contribute at any stage. All children are actively encouraged to volunteer for a ‘part’.

The teacher acts as a facilitator and may perhaps suggest a direction that should or could be explored. Sometimes, as facilitator, I may write out an agreed line or two for one of the budding actors to learn, but more often than not a piece of text is handed to me for approval or comment. This would then be discussed with others in the play and a consensus sought. What is most amusing is that all lines end up being learned by all pupils, which is very handy if some characters are absent on a given day. This approach fits in very well with the Vygotsky model of educational development, which is the basic philosophy of the present curriculum. Indeed in his 1967 *Paper Play and its Role in the Mental Development of the Child*, Vygotsky suggests that the best learning takes place in a ‘zone of proximal development’. Poems can also be dramatised and this can be very beneficial to the understanding and enjoyment of poetry. Humour plays a large part in the evolution of a play in my classroom. Children delight in the magic of words that occur in the English language, the words that rhyme, that have more than one meaning or the words that can be very expressive. They become energised when asked questions like “what would you think this person would say?” or “how would such a character react?” Children, when involved in a dramatic activity, suddenly forget they are in school and that they are learning. The border between learning and play becomes blurred, the class and teacher become one, a plane of cognitive expansion is reached that is both imperceptible yet strangely tangible. What the children learn regarding literacy may not readily be measurable but – one thing is certain – they are engaging in language and print in a way that is enjoyable and inclusive.

This approach to literacy development can be attempted at any time of the year, but I personally have found it beneficial to allow
some months pass until rapport is established with the children. Before ‘launching’ into the method I announce well in advance what I propose to do and that if any children have read or know of any stories that we could ‘dramatise’ to let me know. The usual response to this request is a barrage of suggestions to do the latest blood and guts (yes, it is an all boys’ school) film that is doing the rounds. After some gentle suggestions from me (in the ‘zone of proximal development’) we get on to discuss more feasible projects.

This method of drama production can be used in any class and at any age. The degree of participation by the pupils would depend on their age and academic level. All children can be included at whatever level of participation they themselves choose. I have noticed over the years that as a child grows in confidence or in literacy skills the level of participation increases. Drama as outlined above can be used in any size class as a few plays can be in the development stage at any one time. Some children could be rewriting, others practising lines, others reading new stories and the teacher could be with another group discussing various characters or events of a given ‘play’.

While the focus of this paper is the effect drama can have on literacy development, it can also link other areas of the curriculum quite easily.

The teacher/facilitator does not have to have any background or ability in drama as such, and no teacher should be intimidated or be fearful of trying out this approach due to feelings of inadequacy in the area of ‘drama productions’. Other classes are invited to our class to view the finished products. Usually there are four or five small plays which each last about ten minutes. Other teachers in the school, I believe, regard me as some kind of ‘Drama Guru’ and that what I achieve in the classroom in Drama is way beyond them. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is the children who do the work, I merely provide the encouragement the opportunity and the support, and any teacher can do this.
**REAL BOOKS**

The following submission was written by Julie Rothwell who teaches in a three teacher Church of Ireland School in Bagenalstown, Co. Carlow. At the time of writing she was taking 4th, 5th and 6th classes – both boys and girls.

I place the use of ‘Real Books’ as a high priority in the teaching of English. For the duration of one school term every year, I use a novel with the children instead of their class reader. The children are very enthusiastic about this approach and are very eager to begin the novel each year.

When choosing a novel to use with the children I take their suggestions into account. I choose a novel that is fast-moving in order to appeal to the more reluctant readers. As a result of children watching such a volume of television programmes they look for something with similar ideas in a novel. They are unable to concentrate on lengthy descriptive passages for any length of time and hence become bored with novels that contain them. The class novel has to be suitable for boys and girls alike as we are a mixed school and the boys do not want to read books that are based primarily on girls’ lives and vice-versa.

I teach a particular class of children for three years. Therefore, I attempt to vary the topics covered in the books. For example, when the children are in 4th class I would choose an adventure story, then in 5th class those children would read a fantasy novel and when in 6th class they would read a classic. I ask the children to suggest some titles they would like to read under these particular topics and then we make a decision together.

I use a selection of both work of Irish authors and authors from England and America so as not to limit their reading to the work of Irish authors only.
When choosing a novel I have to be particularly aware of the reading level of the children involved. If there are pupils in 4th Class who have high reading ages I could choose a book which is more difficult to read than if I have 4th class pupils who have low reading ages. This varies from year to year depending on the reading levels of the children involved. If the 4th class children find the book too difficult they become frustrated and lose interest.

I try to include books that are on the syllabus for Junior Certificate English so that the children are familiar with some of the novels before they enter secondary school – this will ease the transfer from primary to secondary school.

When reading and discussing the books with the children I use different approaches and methods every year, I think this variation is very important in order to create enthusiasm and a love of reading, rather than ruining the work based on the novel by, for example, limiting the work to asking comprehension questions on every chapter read. Different novels lend themselves to different approaches also. I use approaches incorporating written and oral work. I try to involve the children in more oral than written work as the children in the senior classes need more opportunities to discuss their opinions orally – some children lack confidence in this area. Some approaches I use are based on individual work and some on group work. Each child buys a copy of the novel to be studied.

Children read two chapters a week (this depends on the length of the chapters). I encourage the weaker readers to read part of a chapter every night in order to keep up and, therefore, the faster readers don’t have to read so slowly as to lose interest. I allow the children to read ahead of the specified chapters if they so wish. I insist on checking if they actually read the specified chapters by asking them ‘closed book’ questions based on those chapters. A mixture of recap questions and these ‘checking’ questions would last for 2 – 3 minutes as the introduction to each lesson. I would
vary this by allowing the children to write and ask their own questions.

Every pupil gets an opportunity to read a few paragraphs of the chapter in order not to have this too drawn out I make sure that every pupil in 5th and 6th classes gets a chance to read at least once a week. Fourth class pupils need to read aloud passages at least twice a week. I usually spend 30 minutes twice a week based solely on the reading of the novel.

Follow up activities vary from five minutes to 45 minute sessions. Activities are either written or oral or both. The following is a list of follow-up activities I have tried and tested.

Written and Oral Activities:

1. Character Profile – This activity can be done after they have read a few chapters. Ask the children to choose one of the main characters and to do a profile on them. Discuss the appearance and personality of one character with the children beforehand. Children also draw a picture of the chosen character.

When more than half the book has been read children could do the following activities:

2. Which character in the story would you like to be and why? What wish might s/he have?
3. Imagine you are a character in the book and describe the biggest shock you got.
4. Interview a character about certain incidents in the book, opinions, likes and dislikes.
5. “If I were XXXX I would ____” children could discuss this orally and then write what they would do in a particular situation. Characters’ reactions in certain situations could be discussed – would they have reacted similarly – why/why not?

6. Write a conversation that might occur between 2/3 characters.

7. Character wall-chart-groups adopt a character and keep track of his/her development in the story.

8. Members of the class discuss in role as characters in the novel the parts they have played. A character who has been a ‘victim’ in the plot now has the opportunity to challenge the actions of more powerful characters.

Suitable character descriptions from novels could also be read aloud e.g. from Roald Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach* and *George’s Marvellous Medicine*.

9. Discuss the development of the hero/heroine of the story. Who is the hero/heroine of the story and why? Did they change?

10. Write a newspaper account of an incident – include headlines, opening, summary, pictures and comments from some people involved. Either selects some events or one major event from a book.

11. Write a diary entry(s) by 2/3 of the main characters.

12. Make a comic-strip summary of a chapter – combining what pupils say and drawing pictures. A comic strip of the whole book could be done in groups – each group taking particular incidents and combining them together as a conclusion.

13. Draw wall maps for quest or journey novels where place names are mentioned a lot e.g. as in *Watership Down*.

14. Dramatise particular incidents from the novel read.

15. Keep a reading log on every chapter.
16. Write an alternative ending to the story.
17. Write and draw an advertisement for a film of the book.
18. Discuss the setting of the book and the plot.
19. Discuss which part of the book has been the most enjoyable. Write about that part and say what it was that made it so enjoyable.

The children do all their written work based on the novel in one copy used specifically for this purpose.

Questions to Ask on a Book

1. What do you know about the topic we are going to read about?
2. If you were X what decision would you make about a particular incident and why would you have come to that decision?
3. What does this chapter remind you of from your own life?
4. What do you have to say about the events of this chapter?
5. What advice would you give X at this point?
6. How does X remind you of another person you have known or read about?
7. What strong feelings, ideas and thoughts did you have as you read this chapter?
8. What thoughts must be going through X’s mind as X does ________?
9. How did you react to this chapter?
10. What message does this chapter have about friendship?
11. What do you predict will happen to X?
12. What do you think of X’s role in a particular incident?
13. Why do you feel X did or did not make the right choice?
14. What happening will you remember most from this chapter?
15. How successfully does the ending bring the story to a close?

Children should be able to discuss hero/heroine/villain, conflicts, challenges, tensions, climax, point of view, characters and relationships and scenes.

My class and I were involved in a research project with a class in America. We read Wildflower Girl by Marita Conlon-Mckenna, as did the American pupils. After reading each chapter we wrote a written response to a question. The children enjoyed this project, as it was not seen as yet more comprehension questions. The questions were based on reader response – e.g. Chapter 5 – “How would you feel if you feasted your eyes on a last look at Ireland and knew there was no going back?” Chapter 19 – “How does it make you feel when no one will believe or support Peggy?”

On completing the books our booklets containing the reader responses were sent to an American University where our children’s responses were compared with the American children’s responses and vice-versa. They made interesting comparisons.

Author’s Visit – this is a very popular event in the school calendar and it brings books and the world of writing and reading alive to all the children. Approximately every second year we organise a visit from a well-known children’s author to our school. Prior to the visit I read aloud one of the author’s books to the class and I encourage them to read some of the other books by this author. I
also encourage them to write down some questions they would like to ask the author. The Arts Council fund part of this visit, which makes it more accessible for schools.

During Book Week in October every year we put a significant emphasis on reading. We run such activities as book quizzes, competitions based on book reviews and drawing pictures of books to read. Children get lots of opportunities to write book reviews during the year. Some of these are read aloud to the other children. Lots of book reviews are also included in our school magazine and put on display in the classroom.

Every second year we are involved in the Readathon which generates a great interest in reading. One pitfall that could be fallen into, especially with the older children, would be to allow them to read books that are too short and too easy for their particular reading level. I emphasise the fact that it is not a matter of reading 22 easy books. I show the children books that I expect them to read during the Readathon. I read the blurbs from them and we have a short discussion from a child who has already read the book.

ERIC – Everybody Reading in Class

This is another very popular activity. I attempt to have this activity on two sessions each week. These sessions last 15 minutes each and I try to set an example by reading a novel at that time. I try to ensure that children have changed their library books prior to these sessions, as this is not a time for changing library books.

I have been teaching for 15 years and during that time I have always used a novel instead of a reader for a portion of the school year. This is possible when even teaching children as young as 1st and 2nd classes. I think children should be immersed in the world of books and I have outlined the approaches I use to do this. These methods can be used in all class situations – single classes will not
be as confined as to the choice of books as classes in a multi-grade situation. I was always an avid reader and I depended on my peers (and still do!!) for book recommendations so I never underestimate the power of the INCIDENTAL chat between child and teacher based on the book they are currently reading, and also the incidental chat between children – one recommending a book to the others.

I hope with the implementation of the Revised Primary English Curriculum that this approach will be more widely used in the primary classrooms of Ireland.

**MODIFIED READING RECOVERY**

The following submission was written by Ted Motherway, Cathaoirleach, Education Committee who teaches in Limerick. Ted has many year’s teaching experience working as a remedial teacher in a suburban school. In his submission Ted describes in detail the approach taken by him to the teaching of literacy as a remedial/learning support teacher.

The school I teach in is in a middle class area and, at one time, the pupils came almost entirely from the school’s middle class catchment area. However, since the late 1980’s a considerable proportion of the pupils – about 40% – have been from disadvantaged areas. The school currently has 280 pupils – boys only – ten classroom teachers, an administrative principal, resource and a remedial/learning support teacher. The intake class is 2nd and the majority of the pupils come from the nearby junior school, which is mixed. After 1st class, the majority of the girls attend the girls-only senior school on the same campus and the majority of the boys come to our school.

When I became a remedial teacher in the late eighties the conventional wisdom was that remedial education should begin when
the pupils were about eight years of age, after they had been given three years ‘to settle’ in school. The normal format for remedial education at that time was withdrawal in small groups and the programme followed placed a very strong emphasis on the teaching of phonics.

I operated on this concept of remedial tuition, and while I felt that it worked, I also felt that it did not work well enough. A particular concern was that the pupils who were receiving remedial tuition tended to depend too much on the remedial help which they were receiving – they made progress in the remedial classroom, but in general could not continue to progress back in the classroom without the help of the remedial teacher.

Shortly after I became a remedial teacher I met with an ex-inspector who had become the author of an English reading scheme. He told me about a remedial programme which he said was ‘sweeping the world’ and he gave me some literature about the programme.

The programme was New Zealand’s Reading Recovery, which was developed by Dame Marie Clay in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Because I had access to the library of a College of Education I was able to read virtually all of the literature on Reading Recovery and was particularly impressed with its apparent success. Shortly afterwards I heard Dame Marie Clay speak at a Reading Association of Ireland Conference in Trinity College, and I also visited the Reading Recovery project in Surrey in England.

What I read and heard impressed me so much that since then, the approach which I have taken to the teaching of literacy in my school could best be described as modified Reading Recovery.

Reading Recovery

Reading Recovery is an early intervention programme which gives intensive individual help to children who have particular diffic-
culties in reading and writing after their first year at school. The programme is a system-wide intervention in New Zealand and is also currently being used in Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. It was introduced into Northern Ireland in 1994.

Normally, the children who are chosen for the programme are those who score in the lowest 20% of their classes after one year at school (roughly age 6), and each child is given individual attention for a period of thirty minutes, five times a week over a period of twelve to twenty weeks.

The approach taken is whole-language with an emphasis on the reciprocity of reading and writing. The programme also places emphasis on metacognition, in that it is directed towards independence in reading with a self-improving system of reading behaviours as the end goal of the programme.

A typical Reading Recovery tutoring session would include each of these activities:

- re-reading of two or more familiar books;
- re-reading the previous day’s new book;
- letter identification;
- writing a story (including hearing sounds in words);
- re-arranging cut-up stories;
- preparing a new book.

Modified Reading Recovery

The modified Reading Recovery approach which I use in my school takes account of a number of facts. Firstly, the children in my school are older than the children for whom Reading Recovery was originally developed. Secondly, it is not possible to implement a one-to-one intervention and thirdly, I am constrained by the
amount of resources available to me. The following teaching procedures, which were based on Reading Recovery procedures, were developed with children taken in small groups, mainly from 2nd, 3rd and 4th classes.

1. Reading Books
The aims in the reading of books are to allow the child to practice his strategies on familiar texts and to use his reading strategies on novel texts. One-to-one instruction is the ideal for the selection of texts which are at the child’s instructional level but, even when children are in small groups it is often possible to choose a text which is within the group’s control. The group can then build up a number of familiar texts for ‘easy’ reading at home or in the classroom. New material can then be introduced with help where necessary. The Reading Recovery practice of re-reading every book to check for accuracy is not suitable for older children because it is too time consuming and the children find it boring.

2. Hearing Sounds in Words
Reading Recovery was developed in the late 1970’s before the term ‘Phonological Awareness’ became widely known, but the ‘Hearing the Sounds in Words’ procedures would now be described as phonological awareness training. Originally I used only the Reading Recovery procedure for phonological awareness training, but I now use other resources which were specifically designed for that purpose.

The original procedure involved the use of sound segment cards to make visual models of words on picture cards, for example a card with three blank squares for the three phonemes in the word C-A-T. The child was then asked to show where the sounds were by pushing counters into the blank squares. This procedure can be used with older children simply by drawing boxes on the board. The specially designed materials which I now use are:
3. Linking Sound Sequence with Letter Sequence

The developer of Reading Recovery, Dame Marie Clay, has said that linking sounds with letters is not ‘a simple problem of phonics’. Her view is that children need to develop:

- an analysis of sounds in spoken words;
- an analysis of written words; and
- the ability to link one with the other.

The use of visual models for words (which was described in the last section), is a natural starting point in this process. After the children have practiced manipulating sounds in the absence of letters or printed words, the next step is to make a model of the sound segment in words, using letters.

There have been important developments in the linking of sound sequences with letter sequences. People like Usha Goswami, Lynnette Bradley, and Peter Bryant have explored the links between rhyming skills and letter patterns. Goswami, for instance, found that if children can rhyme they can learn to use analogies to read words with the same rhyme sound (eg at in cat, ight in fight, etc). She gives the example that if children can rhyme they can produce a whole set of words rhyming with the word ‘light’ and can be taught to make the connection with written words ending with the rhyme ‘ight’.

I use a combination of analogy and visual models to teach the connection between sound and letter sequences, starting with the Oxford Reading Tree Rhyme and analogy card games which have sets of 4 rhyming picture cards and corresponding sets of 4 words with the same rhyme.
There is no research that I know of which has developed a hierarchy of difficulty of rhymes, but I suggest the following sequence which works well for me:

1. vowel – consonant e.g. fl-at;
2. vowel – consonant blends e.g. f-ast;
3. vowel – consonant diagraph e.g. d-ish;
4. long-vowel diagraphs e.g. bl-ue;
5. long-vowel – consonant e.g. b-oat;
6. long – vowel – silent ‘e’ e.g. r-ope;
7. ‘other’ vowel diagraphs e.g. l-oud;
8. ‘flung’ rhymes eg c-ould.

I have found that children do not use analogy naturally; it is common to find that children who have spelt a regular uncommon word (like ‘fad’) couldn’t read the same word shortly afterwards – even in their own writing. These children need to be actively taught analogy.

4. Teaching For Strategies
This, I think, is one of the most important procedures in Reading Recovery and it can be used with poor readers of all ages. It is based on the notion of metacognition and the aim is to help children to develop a self-improving and self-monitoring system for reading an appropriate level text for the precise words and meaning of the author.

Reading Recovery offers a large number of suggestions which teachers have used in getting passive, poor readers to become more active in searching for cues, predicting possible responses and verifying these responses. Ideally, these activities take place in one-to-one situations with a plentiful supply of books at a
range of instructional levels. However, I have found that it is possible to implement most of these suggestions in small group situations with a reasonable amount of books at various levels – provided that there is an understanding that only the teacher is allowed to offer suggestions; children in the groups are not allowed to ‘help’ or ‘correct’ the child who is reading.

It is not possible here to give an exhaustive list of suggestions, but they would include:

- Reading back an error sentence to the child and asking him ‘Is that right?’
- Re-reading the previous word or words with fluent phrasing and stopping at a problem word.
- Re-reading the previous phrase leading up to a problem word and pointing to the rhyme of the word.
- Being careful not to develop a situation where the child waits for the teacher to do the work.
- Prompting the child to use a special cue that you know s/he knows.
- Sometimes just giving the word but then asking ‘Would that make sense?’ or ‘Would that fit?’ or ‘Do you think that it looks like that word?’
- Encouraging self-monitoring by asking ‘Were you right?’ after both correct and incorrect words and ‘How did you know?’ after correct ones.
- Encouraging cross-checking by pointing out discrepancies between two sources of cues and saying ‘It could be... but look at...’
- Developing the child’s ability to search for all types of cues by saying: ‘You said... Does it make sense?’ or
‘Does that sound right?’ or
‘Does it look right?’ or
‘What’s wrong?’

- Commenting positively on self-correction by saying ‘I liked the way you found out what was wrong all by yourself.’
- Placing responsibility on the child to find his/her own mistakes by not correcting immediately, and saying ‘You made a mistake on that page. Can you find it?’
- Thinking aloud on more complex texts to model your way of getting the meaning of the author.

5. Writing Stories
This is one area of Reading Recovery which does not fit well with working with groups of older children. Typically in a Reading Recovery lesson the child writes as much of a story as s/he can alone in each session, and when s/he comes to a problem word the sound sequence techniques which have already been described are used. This story writing is particularly useful with young children because many of the operations needed in early reading are practiced in another form in early writing, and children’s spelling would provide evidence of their stage of development in relation to phonological awareness.

Writing stories would also be desirable with older children because it would provide a context for supportive activities using the techniques described earlier, but I have found that it is not possible to find time in a relatively short lesson for the time that would be needed for this type of story-writing. As a compromise I use Brendan Culligan’s dictation sentences as a context for linking sound sequence with letter sequence, as well as for teaching spelling strategies!
Conclusion

My own experience of adapting Reading Recovery techniques for use with older children in small groups suggests that much of the programme can be refined to teach any group of children successfully. In fact, many aspects of the programme have been transplanted to other widely used programmes. For example, Success For All emphasises teaching metacognitive skills using the techniques described in the ‘Teaching for Strategies’ section, Hatcher’s Sound Linkage programme uses the Reading Books section, and the Restructured Chapter I has all the main elements of Reading Recovery.

Some of the elements of the programme are suited to short-term interventions – for example, ‘Hearing Sounds in Words’ and ‘Linking Sound with Letter Sequence’ – while other aspects are suitable for longer term interventions (e.g. ‘Teaching for Strategies’) or for use with children of all ages. The ‘Writing Books’ element does create the problem that large amounts of time are required for implementation.

All in all, the underlying philosophy of Reading Recovery with its emphasis on pupil-teacher interaction rather than on isolated skills is effective in improving reading and writing, is popular with the pupils and satisfying for the teacher.

**The Challenge of Teaching Reading**

The author of the following submission is Catherine Murphy. Catherine has been teaching Junior Infants to First Class for the past ten years. Catherine teaches in Lismire National School. The average number of pupils she would have in her class would be 28. In her submission she describes the teaching of reading as a very challenging task. Her objective as a teacher is that the children
will be able to read fluently and comprehend a variety of books, suitable for age and ability, by the end of First Class. Below she has outlined her approach to the teaching of reading.

Junior Infants

In my experience, most children like and respond to stories. When teaching reading, I try to keep this foremost in my mind and try to ensure that the reading material is interesting for, and relevant to, the child. Therefore, from as early as possible, in Junior Infants I use the Sight Words they have learned and make up stories about the children themselves. Almost every child has no difficulty remembering the word ‘Santa’ so by Christmas it is very easy to produce a ‘book’ with a one or two line story on each page about Santa and each of the children in the class. Even the weakest children have searched their ‘book’ with great haste to find ‘their story’.

Reading Schemes

Reading should be an enjoyable experience and I feel that this places a great onus on teachers.

I am absolutely delighted that ‘formal’ reading books are no longer a ‘must’ in Junior Infants. I have found many of the Reading Schemes irrelevant and at times extremely difficult, especially for the weaker child. This has often resulted in a totally negative attitude to reading.

Also, many of the sight words that I would consider vital in the early stages of reading were quite often not introduced until quite late in the reading scheme.
Phonics and Rhyme

While trying to build up a basic sight vocabulary I also concentrate on two other aspects of reading in Junior Infants – initial phonics and rhyme. By the end of Junior Infants I would hope that the children would know the names and initial sounds of the letters of the alphabet and that they would have mastered the concept of rhyme. During my time teaching younger children, I have found that the Senior Infant child who cannot recognise rhyming words generally needs remedial help, and I would consider it an early indicator.

Senior Infants

Storybooks

In Senior Infants I have once again found the Reading Schemes quite limiting. I feel that they have a value in language development because of the colourful illustrations and as a ‘tool’ for teaching the mechanics of reading. However, I believe that they are inadequate as the sole reading material for children. Therefore, I would again produce reading books/sheets for the children on a regular basis. While these books would lack the colour of the reading scheme, their major value is in developing the child’s interest in reading. These books would include passages about Hallowe’en, Christmas, snow etc with the Senior Infants as characters in the stories. The children illustrate each page and particular attention is paid to the fact that the illustration must mirror the story. I find this useful as a check on the children’s comprehension skills. A measure of the success of these books must be the cries of indignation when the Junior Infants receive a new ‘book’ and the Senior Infant one is not yet ready to go to print!

Phonics

The phonic programme which I follow in Senior Infants aims to consolidate the Junior Infant phonic work and lead the children to
decode three-letter words with a medial vowel. This also helps their spelling of simple words, which they will need to write their news etc. Some children who have difficulty recalling Sight Words find decoding words phonetically an easier task. Once they have mastered the decoding of three-letter words they will often attempt more difficult words.

Further Reading
The increased sight vocabulary and phonetic skills acquired during Senior Infants enable the children to tackle a wider range of reading material. This gives me the opportunity to use photocopied reading material from a variety of texts for Senior Infants. As we do not use a formal Workbook per se I give the children photocopied sheets with simple facts about whichever topic we have discussed e.g. the robin. They find this challenging and learn to recognise words from the context, a skill which the reading scheme does not demand or develop.

Paired Reading
I begin Paired Reading in Senior Infants from February. Each child will read approximately sixty simple books (Oxford Reading Tree, Nelson Big Boot Series and Story Worlds) by the end of Senior Infants. I am a firm believer in what are now called ‘real books’. I think it is very important to provide the children with interesting books which can be read in one sitting.

First Class
By First Class I would hope that the children are ready for a wide variety of reading. While I use a reading scheme I photocopy reading passages from many different books – some factual, some fictional.
Phonics
I use the reading texts to continue the phonic programme informally to include consonant blends, long vowels and vowel diagraphs. While this sounds complicated the opposite is the reality. Most children do not find consonant blends difficult once they have mastered decoding of three-letter words. The only other rules I feel they need to know are about the ‘magic’ silent e and that ‘when two vowels go walking the first one does the talking.’ These rules equip the children with the skills to decode most of the words that they will encounter.

Spelling
The phonic programme in First Class is also very useful in helping the children with spelling. Other key words, which they need in their writing are learned using the Charles Crypt’s method of Look, Say, Cover, Write and Check. The children are also trained to look at the words, to see the smaller words within words and to identify the problem areas within more difficult words. The children also learn word families by learning words like e.g. might, all etc.

Paired Reading
The Paired Reading is continued in First Class and the children read approximately one hundred and twenty books during the year. The children do not see this as ‘work’ – when there is a homework free night they still insist on taking a book. As the first class children read a variety of material I don’t feel the need to produce their own books for them as frequently as I do for the Infants. However, Christmas provides great opportunity for home publishing and gives a break from the reading scheme.
Reading Scheme
I find that after Christmas the children begin to read fluently. They have built up a sight vocabulary, they have had a lot of practice using phonics and they have read many different stories at home with their parents through paired reading. As a result I use the next book of the reading scheme differently to the other books previously covered. The book is divided into chapters and from about April we read a chapter per day, finishing the book in about three weeks. This, I find, does not lead to boredom, which can often be a problem with a book, which takes months to finish.

Progress in Reading
First Class is the year where I find the greatest improvement in reading in the junior classes. By comparing MICRA-T results I have found that many children increase their reading ages by up to two or more years, to well beyond their chronological ages. The weaker children, however, generally need more time to master reading.

In conclusion, I hope that the guidelines set out in the Revised Curriculum, particularly in relation to reading, will be adhered to. As formal reading is not to be introduced in Junior Infants I am disappointed to see that the publishing companies are producing readers for these classes. I admit that these readers are attractive and much simpler than previous ones. However, it means that once more teachers are going to feel pressurised into introducing formal reading, despite all the indications that pre-reading activities would be much more beneficial at this early stage. There is also the cost factor for parents. I have heard of one child who has received a book bill for £50.00. No, not a post-primary student, but a four year old commencing Junior Infants!

So much for the Revised Curriculum, with less emphasis on text books!
IDEAS FOR OLDER READERS

The following submission was written by Sr Paula Conway who teaches in an eight teacher school in Tullow, Co. Carlow. In her submission she outlines some novel ideas which she uses to encourage her older readers to continue reading.

Reading
1. Teacher reading short story, children predict ending, written or orally.
2. Discuss best possible ending.
3. Complete actual story ending.
4. Compare:
   1. Functional reading in groups of 3/4 following adequate preparation by teacher.
   1. Each member of the group reads aloud to others while they follow text closely and note errors without interruption! Discuss.
   1. Writing/composing pupil’s own book of stories, reading to class on occasion.
   1. Writing a story for a younger member of family or lower class.
   1. Role playing – interviews – reporting on local/school events – typing/writing of report display.
1 Mock telephone conversations e.g. to doctor, teacher etc.
1 Writing letters/protest etc (second level).
1 Dramatising – stories appropriate to age /events /moods/arguments...
1 Puppet shows – create own dialogue or write from known story e.g. Goldilocks or age appropriate – history event.
1 Groups assigned to watching news each evening or scanning newspapers (senior) reporting to class as newsreader.
1 Sharing own news with other pupils A-B, B-A, and then reporting what you heard from partner.
1 Sharing on TV programmes appropriate to age.
1 Speaking on a topic for 1 minute or talk about (junior).
1 Debate (6th/5th level).

Poetry
1. Teacher reading number of poems for pleasure:
   1 Class pick a favourite.
   1 Discuss/descriptive/colour/rhyming words, phrases etc/sequence of ideas.
2. Class group share a poem/discuss as above printing/writing out/decorating poems for display:
   1 Learning verse/verses, lecture groups and presenting to class.
   1 Writing of own poetry at senior level.
   1 Compiling favourite anthologies/decorating using some script writing skills.
1. Art frieze of poems.
2. Reading a poem/class suggest title no given title.

The following submission was written by Anne Kennelly, who also teaches in an eight teacher school in Tullow, Co Carlow.

Interesting Expression? Vocabulary

1. Each pupil has a notebook (on back of copy). During the year when reading from class texts, library books, novels etc. Teacher draws attention of class to the way writer/author has expressed events. Any that appeal to child can be written in a notebook to be used or adapted at a later stage. I find that most pupils develop their own creative ability and consequently use very expressive phrases in their writing.

Examples in text (5th class reader Silver Lining):

“The Trees” pgs 62-69;
“a bright shining blue and gold day”;
“a round solemn face like a freckled owl”;
“when the moon crept over the sky at night”.

In fact this story is an excellent story to start with as it has numerous examples.

2. Pictures/paintings can be used to get the child’s ‘expressive juices’ going.

One to start with maybe – weather, ‘an angry sky’ etc. Then scenery – rivers, lakes etc. An example of what I got from one child this year – a child who scored a sten score of 4 on Micra-T Level 3.
Personal Spellings Notebook. Again, probably something used by many teachers – words that are spelled incorrectly by children (common, everyday words) are written into a notebook. These make up the child’s ‘spelling list’. Include with these the ‘core words’ (INTO Literacy Course).

The child will eventually learn how to write these words correctly.

What did I read? Content For Weaker Children

Very often weaker children have the ‘mechanics’ of reading and little else. In order to improve their comprehension skills, I get them to read a very simple (sometimes even two sentences) passage and then ask them to retell it in their own words. Then ask children questions.

“It was a sunny day. Mary went to Dublin by train. She met her friend Susan. They chatted together as they shopped.”

Q What was the weather like?
Q Who is mentioned in the story?
Q In what city did the girls meet?
Q What did they do in Dublin?

The passages then get progressively longer and a little more involved. Children are asked for the main points in the story.

Creative Writing — Looking Through Bottles

Have a selection of different sized and shaped bottles. Bring the class outside and they have to explore, but must view the world through the bottle they are holding in front of their eyes. I find that when they get over the fit of giggles they get into the spirit of the lesson. We return to the classroom and write about what we
saw. This piece of writing could be a story, poetry or just phrases – anything that the child wants to write. (Often, I get underwater scenes from those who have looked through green bottles). This exercise is best done in 2nd or 3rd term when they know what to expect! (and are used to the teacher’s ways) and maybe strange methods.

**Parental Involvement in Children’s Reading**

The following submission emphasises the vital importance of involving parents in children’s learning to read. The author who did not wish to be identified suggests various ways parents can become involved in the entire reading process including using television to improve skills

“Parents may know what to teach but they are unlikely to be successful if they do not also know how to teach” (*Humphreys*, 1993:188)

For the past number of years, I am privileged to have been involved with a wide variety of parents and school situations, through the National Parents Council (Primary), parents’ associations and in my own all-girls’ Dublin school. The focus of this involvement has been for the most part, to help parents to understand and to contribute more successfully to their children’s development and education, in areas such as the various aspects of literacy, oral language development, positive management of homework and learning difficulties and I include suggestions which seem to have worked well for them. I have become convinced of the value of parental support, not only for their own children but in the classroom and for the work of the teacher and I am heartened by the amount of educational research and discussion, which concurs with my view, including Howe &

As teachers, particularly in the present climate of such rapid change in our role, expansion of our workload and demands for our attention, we can easily feel too overwhelmed to take on yet another responsibility – the training of parents. But in my view the time and effort are well spent with many very positive returns to children and teachers alike. As Merttens, Newland & Webb (1996: 11) suggest:

“Once parents have been alerted to the pedagogic value in ordinary situations they will be more inclined to seize other learning opportunities to share informally with their children.”

I include for consideration suggestions for parents and children to share learning in:

- reading;
- oral language;
- writing;
- spelling.

The suggestions are in no way intended to be prescriptive or cast in stone. The ideas can be easily changed or adapted by teachers for guiding parents at home or if helping in the classroom, by classroom assistants or for peer-tutoring situations (where a more able or older child works with a child of lesser ability in a carefully organised way). The suggestions and recommendations are also reflective of the different approaches contained in the Revised Primary Curriculum.
Paired Reading

Teachers usually have their own favourites among the various programmes for encouraging parents and others, to share reading with children e.g. Paired Reading, CAPER (Children and Parents Enjoying Reading) DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) and each, confirmed by documented evidence, is a valuable way of improving children’s reading. I usually use the Paired Reading Programme and have found it to be an excellent way to encourage an interest in reading, confidence and fluency among almost all children (Infants – sixth class, including children who experience learning difficulties and who may have become disheartened and disinterested. I find the Paired Reading packs from Mary Immaculate Training College, Limerick (also available in most Education Centres) and from Keith Topping (Kirklees Metropolitan Council) very helpful, with advice and practical strategies for setting up and monitoring the programme (intended to be run over a specific period), for organising an information meeting for parents and included too, are guidelines for peer – tutoring. However, in each case, it is advisable to use the training video for parents selectively. Boredom can set in if left running for too long! As it seems important for young readers to see men involved with reading, I always try to coax the dad out to the meetings – with varying degrees of success. But it is still worth the effort and those who do come are usually happy to take part, which seems to go down a treat with their children, not to mention the opportunities for extra bonding!

After the meeting, a short handout, with the main points, acts as a useful reminder. Where parents cannot attend, they are invited to send a substitute. Later, absent parents can be invited to borrow the video or to view it in the school. But with the best will in the world, the Paired Reading handout can be mislaid and parents can forget the important points of the relaxed positive method and slip back into a more didactic, instructional mode. I have
found it useful to attach a short reminder (sample below) to the inside cover of the classroom library books.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shared Paired Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research indicates a significant improvement in the child’s reading ability when guidelines are followed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Child + enthusiastic adult read aloud together in a quiet comfortable situation for 10 minutes.
2. As the child wishes to read unaided – let him/her. If s/he stops at a word, simply say the word, s/he’ll repeat it and both of you together carry on in chorus until s/he wants to read by him/herself again. Don’t worry him/her about insignificant errors.
3. Praise his/her efforts etc. Chat about the story/book and always have a stress-free atmosphere.
4. When s/he is ready for another book please sign the Reading Record and perhaps comment on his/her response to the book.

This could instead, if desired, be attached to the top of the child’s Reading Record Card or inside his/her homework diary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>READING RECORD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BOOK ON LOAN TO:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please sign when finished and comment on the child’s response.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMENT:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Signature:__________________________
Parents who cannot fully participate
As part of a recent course, I surveyed a number of our parents in relation to their children’s leisure reading. While many often expressed appreciation for and a willingness to support any shared reading initiative, the majority preferred their children to be given books which they could manage largely on their own – understandable sentiments, considering the pressures in many homes. As a result, particularly with children who experience difficulty, I now resist the temptation to push more and more challenging books on them and try, as far as possible, to pitch most at the children’s reading level.

It is also worth including in the planning, some provision for children who will miss out altogether on any support from home. Perhaps time could be set aside in school, with a classroom assistant, a helping parent or older child (‘buddy’). It is interesting to note that in buddy-reading, while the younger child improves as expected, the older child’s reading skills improve even more – proving the point, I suppose, that you really learn something by teaching it!

It is important also, to ensure that these children are able to read by themselves, any books or other materials given to them, to be read at home. In any class, there are children who can read only a small number of the available classroom library books. A suggestion, particularly in the absence of a school library, is to borrow suitable books from the local library, from another teacher or from the Learning Support Teacher. This has worked well in our own school. As a Learning Support Teacher, I also try to provide monitored Paired Reading to the children in some classes, who don’t quite qualify for ‘Remedial’ support, but who really need the extra attention. I find that the first twenty minutes of the day seems to be the best time for us.

While some parents cannot, for whatever reason, engage in a Paired Reading programme, we can help them to appreciate the
value of sharing whatever reading occasion they can, with their children – whether it be scanning the supermarket shelves, a telephone directory, the television page, the classifieds, reading a bill, a sports report, the instructions on a food packet, or sharing rhymes, songs and stories with them. On the other hand, parents can also make a difference to their children’s literacy by spending time simply talking with them. See the Oral Language section for suggestions.

Boosting the Classroom Library, with the Help of Parents

With the emphasis in the Revised Curriculum on Real Books, our school, in the absence of a school library and with the help of parents, decided to try to add to our classroom stocks and to have more choice over our DES allocation. We were especially anxious to acquire more children’s non-fiction and resource books for the teaching of literacy. A Book Drive was launched and over a three-week period, parents were urged to donate books to the school. While it was slow at first and took a reminder or two, it was a great success, with the vast majority of the books ideal for immediate use. Some schools also invite publishers into the school, who sell to the parents and who, on the basis of their sales, in turn, contribute children’s books to the school.

Familiarizing Parents and Children with the Local Library

A valuable way to include parents in the development of their children’s literacy is to plan trips to the local library, encouraging parents to accompany the class. Perhaps, the class could be divided, by arrangement with an agreeable colleague, so that half of the children, along with their parents, are taken at a time. There are great ideas in the Prim Ed teacher resource books – Exploring the Library series, which can be useful.
The First Rule
This is a useful strategy for children and their accompanying parents (in a library or bookshop, for instance) to choose a book which is not too difficult for the children to read independently.

- The child chooses a book and opens it at random.
- With one hand open, the child begins to read.
- Should s/he stumble or struggle with a word s/he turns down a digit. If by the end of the page all five fingers are closed in – forming a fist – that particular book is difficult and would be more suitable for the parent to read along with or to the child.

Incidentally, it is worth reminding parents to encourage children to include non-fiction when choosing books.

The Community and Children’s Literacy
The community can also be encouraged to become involved in its children’s literacy. The librarian could recruit available local people who would be willing to give their time to read or tell stories, especially stories of local interest, who may be agreeable to help with: homework, field/project work, shared reading, music appreciation, supervision of Art, video viewing, computer work etc.

Reading Television
In any discussion on children and reading, the problems associated with watching too much television come up for airing and indeed Irish children, on an average school day, watch almost twice as much television as their EU counterparts (*Irish Times*: 14.11.95) Instead of treating television as an adversary, we can show parents how it can be an ally, as Jeffers (*Irish Times*: 24.1.98) recommends:
“sharing the occasions with their children, actively responding, commenting and explaining, which is crucial to shaping their interpretative abilities and in our professional role as educators, we should help children and their parents to appreciate the intricacies and literacy of television and build on it”

We can see how the skills involved in helping children to become literate television viewers can also help them to develop their print literacy too. Through television, they can learn for example, to discriminate truth from bias, subjective from objective reporting, the manipulative powers of advertising and some programmes, to appreciate language, plot, characterisation and the characteristics of various genres.

Oral Language

Parents are not always immediately aware of the connection between oral language development and literacy acquisition. It usually comes as a surprise, too, to learn that the language facility of the average four year old child starting school these days is very much below that of 30 years ago and the amount of time per day, on average, spent by adult and child talking together is also seriously reduced.

It is, therefore, worthwhile for teachers to show parents how so many aspects of oral language are important for acquiring literacy skills – e.g. talk and vocabulary – thinking, understanding, relating to others, listening, responding, play etc. Oral language is so important that people like Beve Hornsby (1994) recommend that we talk to babies from the day they are born. Perhaps, the research, cited by Patricia Redlich (Irish Times, 13.1.99) showing how talking to babies can improve their intelligence dramatically by the time they are 9 months old, would act as a further spur! Parents, (especially fathers with their sons) could be advised to:
Talk with their children – to articulate and sequence shared experiences.

To encourage their children to listen to, repeat and respond to instructions, jokes and stories. As psychologist, Gordon Wells (cited by Howe & Griffey, 1994:40) found:

“of all the activities that contribute to a child becoming literate, the experience of listening to stories is especially valuable. Listening to stories also helps children to learn to concentrate on the human voice. An individual who cannot do that experiences enormous difficulties in learning to read”.

To encourage children, to be able to remember and repeat rhymes, jingles, poems, songs and to develop an interest in words – very important for developing literacy – language, phonological development, auditory processing and memory and parents are urged to begin with very young pre-schoolers.

To encourage children to discuss a television programme, or a piece of reading – the picture, content, language, characters, plot, main points, etc. Indeed, I often recommend, especially for young children, who are experiencing difficulty, a discussion in advance of a difficult piece of assigned reading, to familiarize the child with any problematic language or ideas. We can learn language through reading but we need language to learn to read.

To avoid, if possible, over exposure to poor role models – e.g. poor television programmes, an au pair or other carer, whose English language is not secure.

Paired Writing

The Revised Curriculum invites us teachers to undertake major changes in our whole approach to writing. These differences, together with the reasons and benefits could be explained to
parents so that they will fully understand the changes and be patient and supportive of their children’s early attempts at writing and spelling. Teachers might like to consider the Paired Writing Flow Chart (Fig. 1), which I have adapted from Keith Topping’s Kirklees Paired Writing Project.

A further suggestion for encouraging fledgling writers at home is for parents to supply the child with a copy or notebook to keep by his/her bedside for inspirations!

Since computers are fast becoming a fact of life for children and many homes already have one, parents could be encouraged to help their children to learn keyboarding skills.

Writing Frames
With the emphasis in the Revised Curriculum, on discovery, independent and co-operative learning, writing frames, I feel, come into their own. They provide a simple framework/scaffold and support for children, of all ages to write in various genres, independently of the teacher and I am looking forward to using them more. They seem to be especially useful for helping children to organise their writing when accessing and recording information and one of our teachers has used them very successfully with her First Class children. There are many publications, featuring different frames, and as teachers become familiar with them, they can easily devise their own. Meanwhile, may I recommend a closer look at the David Wray frames (samples: fig. 2) which are also available in chart form:
Paired Writing

C = Child

Motivation to write

Talk and discussion
To generate ideas and possible topics

H Questions, prompts and encourages

H Writes down suggested topics on ‘Ideas for Writing’ page

H Is helping the child to think and talk about e.g. experiences, events, issues, feelings, stories, drama, something being learned, life at home and at school, friends, interests etc.

Praise

Pre-writing
Through discussion, child chooses topic

H Questions, prompts, encourages child – generating ideas for writing (brainstorming)

H Makes one-word notes

Praise

Draft 1
Look at the notes
Think of the audience
Start a rough draft
Double or triple line spacing
Don’t worry about punctuation or spelling – proceed as follows:

Child says a sentence and chooses:

Stage 1
H Writes it all
C Copies it all

Stage 2
H Writes hard words in for C

Stage 3
H Writes hard words in rough
C Copies in

Stage 4
H Says how to spell hard words

Stage 5
C Writes it all

H Helps if C struggles on a word for more than 10 seconds, usually by going back a stage on that word.

Praise
H  Reads the draft out loud, making it sound good!
C  Reads the draft out loud with H repeating any words read wrongly.

C  looks at draft and marks where to improve the content – adding, deleting, moving, re-wording
Or  if the next draft will be the final one:
C  Looks at the draft
C  Marks where to improve the meaning, adding, deleting, moving, re-wording
And  the punctuation, grammar and some of the spellings. In this case the child will write Draft 2 and is then finished.

Draft 2 (where the drafting processing is continuing).
C  Writes draft 2
H  Reads draft 2 aloud
C  Marks where to make improvements, including spelling grammar, punctuation this time.

Final Draft
C  To write and read the finished work.  Praise, Praise, Praise!

(Adopted from Keith Toppings Kirklees Paired Writing Project)

Figure 2: Samples of Writing Frames from David Wray
(http://.warwick.ac.uk/staff/d.j.wray.html)

What I know:

What I want to know:

What I learned:

Before I visited:  I thought that:

But when I got there, I found that:

I also learned that:

Finally I learned that:
Other frames include genres such as: *persuasion *a procedure *instructions *explanation *argument *making comparisons etc.

Spelling

Whatever the spelling programme teachers use in their schools, it is worth explaining the rationale and offer suggestions for home learning. Parents are interested to know how children learn differently and how a multi-sensory approach is therefore very advisable in learning to spell. The *Look, *Say, *Write, *Check method has worked for me over the years accompanied by a children’s worksheet (Fig.3a) and Guidelines for Parents (Figures 3b), which I devised for the job. Again, as with the acquisition of any new method, I try to ensure that it is introduced and practiced well in the classroom with the children over several weeks before introducing it at home. In this way children are clear and can easily train or remind their parents. I also recommend Improving Spelling by Brendan Culligan, which is packed full of practical help and strategies for teachers, children and parents.

Paired or Cued Spelling

Teachers who wish their children to have an individualized spelling programme, or who want to set up support for them in the classroom, might find the Shared Spelling flowchart (which I have again adapted from Keith Topping’s Cued Spellings) worth a look (fig. 4)

Spellings

S a c a w a c
(say and cover and write and check)

Knick, Knack, Sacawac,
This is how to spell.
Look and cover
And write the word.
Then check it really well.
Successful Spelling

Help the child to:

1. Examine each word and its parts, for meaning pattern, grammar or to look for a ‘picture’ in it.  
   e.g. un in untidy, ing in doing, manage

2. Look at and spell the word aloud  
   or
   Look at and say the word aloud slowly.
   Specific parts can be overwritten in colour e.g. un tidy

3. Cover the word and write it from memory (no peeking till done!)

4. Check each part of the word.

5. Repeat steps 3 and 4.

6. Repeat steps 3 and 4.

7. A problematic word can be included (briefly) in next evening’s spelling homework.

SPELLINGS

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<th>Write each word carefully. Then:</th>
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<th>Write Check and Cover</th>
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Shared Spellings

Identifying words which need to be learned

- Helper begins, by calling out all the words assigned for that day (from his/her personal dictionary, spelling notebook, diary or spelling programme).
- Child writes them.
- Together, helper and child identify the words in need of attention.
- Helper praises (for good attempts, remembered cues etc).

Learning Together

1. Child chooses one of the words.
2. Helper ensures that the child can read and understand the word.
3. Child copies the word carefully and re-reads it for accuracy.
4. Child is encouraged to interact with the word and to identify helpful cues:
   - letter string, sound pattern, syllable, prefix, suffix, mnemonic.
   - visualization – the child makes a picture with part(s) of the word e.g. manage.
5. Child covers the word and attempts to write it. (3 times in all).
6. After each attempt, the child is encouraged to check the accuracy. If wrong – go through step 4 again, perhaps using a different cue.
7. The other words, one at a time, are learned in the same way.

o At the end of the session (or later on), the child can be encouraged to write out all the words.

**Weekly Review**

- **Wrong word(s):** do steps again or put on list for next time. Helper praises / acknowledges effort.

- Child writes all the words for the week and checks.

**Mastery Review**

- **Wrong Words:** can be learned or included in next week’s work.

- Helper praises/acknowledges effort.

If it can be managed, for example, after a month’s work, it is worth revising previously learned spellings.

**Some Tips For The Apprehensive Teacher!**

In order to effectively implement the Revised Curriculum, we will need all the help that we can get and schools are already involving their parents and others in the classroom. However, it is important in these situations to provide some training and monitoring. As we all know, teaching is not a simple matter and we should not give the impression that it is. But for any teacher who may feel an initial apprehension or inexperience in talking with groups of
parents, may I make a few suggestions:
I found Working with Parents (Dolores Curran: 1989) particularly helpful.

Teachers could prepare together and/or co-present or chair in each other’s classrooms.

A parent could act as chairperson, or as Dolores Curran suggests, having an unrelated man and woman co-facilitating the meeting has the effect of enticing father figures to attend.

It is important, as far as possible, to keep the meeting focussed. Deviations from the topic or enquiries about a child, for example, no matter how informal can be deferred to a more suitable time.

Last, but not least – many of our INTO colleagues and fellow-teachers could, by arrangement, pass on some presentation and facilitation skills, to teachers or schools. Perhaps, this could also be arranged through local education centres.

In conclusion, I would reiterate the view that teachers helping parents to help their children is a very valuable and worthwhile exercise and is time well spent and I hope that these suggestions for Reading, Writing, Spelling and Oral Language, are of some benefit.

“When parents and teachers acknowledge their complementary expertise and arrange to share it, the result can be an education institution, richer in experience, innovative in its day to day practices and more responsive to change in a democratic society”.
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Literacy: ‘An Inclusive and Eclectic Approach’

Reflections on Professional Experience and Classroom Practice

The writer of this submission is Eddie Molloy, a teacher with 29 years experience, including experience as a remedial/learning support teacher. In this paper on literacy practice Eddie is very conscious of the current concerns with the standards of literacy in Ireland. In this piece Eddie shares with us his perception of what it means to be literate.

Literacy: Definition and Understanding

This writer circulated a confidential questionnaire (Appendix 1) to all 21 teaching colleagues in our school, with the request for a personal and professional opinion as to their understanding of literacy and its teaching. Seventeen of the 21 focused largely on literacy as being the ability to read and write properly. The others including myself believe that communication, knowledge, understanding, enjoyment etc. are essential components in the teaching of literacy skills. All responses were valid, acceptable and understandable. This writer has always believed that literacy, and its teaching, is much more than the ability to read and write.

The acquisition of literacy is an evolving life-long process, acquiring the ability to read and write, but also the competence and confidence to use printed work and information everyday, in the process of life living and learning, personal and professional development, from the cradle to the grave.

In speaking with a fellow classmate, who ‘slipped through the system’, and only learned to read and write at the age of 35, he gave a one word response when asked as to what literacy meant, and that was ‘freedom’. He added further “…outside of a person
saying I love you, the greatest gift you can give your fellow man is an informed freedom of thought”. He also said “....you can travel the world simply by sitting in a chair reading a book”. Quite moving and incisive personal experience and comments on the acquisition of literacy.

An Inclusive and Eclectic Approach

There has been an enormous amount of research and development into the area of strategies and methodologies for the teaching of literacy. New ideas and practices are constantly evolving. This is most valuable and encouraging. There is an ever-increasing amount of reading material available. I would like to suggest however that unless an eclectic approach is pursued and implemented, the tremendous value of all these materials methodologies and strategies may not be as effective as they could. All factors need to gel together in a Gestalt when teaching literacy. Age and interest appropriate material, social background, a deep awareness and understanding of learning styles of both children and teacher, parental experiences and support, the culture of the school and school community, the persona of the teacher and the child – in short the daily reality of all concerned, carry equal weight and importance in the teaching and evolving of literacy and literacy skills. The process involved in an awareness of same is fundamental. As with the whole of education, the development, the teaching and acquisition of literacy skills, is rooted in relationships – intra and interpersonal. This has been the rationale and foundation of my classroom practice for the past 29 years.

Has this professional practice been successful? That is for others to decide on. I am personally and professionally satisfied that it has been an effective approach from the reactions, comments and observations of colleagues, children, parents and past pupils. As a teacher and educator, this teacher is conscious that I do not possess answers and solutions for all eventualities, in the process of teach-
ing literacy skills, but I do believe that all factors, social, environment, personal, academic, intra and interpersonal, in the teaching, nurturing and sustaining of literacy skills need equal emphasis, attention and development.

There have been some difficulties in pursuing this approach. Creating a collaborative approach to classroom practice has been difficult at times. Acknowledging appropriately the experiences of parents in their own acquisition or non-acquisition, of literacy skills, has to be sensitively and confidentially handled. Changing school cultures to embrace an eclectic approach to teaching literacy skills can sometimes prove to be difficult. These difficulties can sometimes be overcome quite easily if the concept and practice of acknowledging, and giving equal value, to both the social and academic curriculum, in both theory and classroom practice is carried out. This writer has found using the above approach to be empowering, enriching and congruent, in the leading-out, nurturing, sustaining and teaching of the skills of literacy.

Conclusion

Having used the aforementioned approach in the past, and continuing to use it, I believe that further development can enhance the process. An understanding and evolution of a counselling approach to the teaching of literacy could be explored. Creating a professional partnership – teacher, child, parents and whole school team/community is an absolute necessity. A whole school atmosphere and vision dedicated to the teaching and promotion of literacy is essential. Developing the skills of empathy, mutual respect, active listening and learning, for and from all involved is essential. Pupils, parents and the whole school community teachers and educators must be encouraged to engage in reflective practice on all the issues academic, social, personal and professional which lie at the foundation of the education approach.
Developing the practice of peer tutoring and learning in the acquisition of literacy is of tremendous benefit.

Teacher personal and professional development needs to be accelerated in order to empower all teachers with their own wealth and depth of talent, ideas, skills and commitment. Teachers need to assert their own professionalism and due validation and recognition needs to be given to this issue.

The single most important issue, this writer suggests which needs urgent attention in the teaching and nurturing of literacy skills and indeed education in the broadest sense, is the question of school and school community cultures. This writer is concerned that perhaps very little progress can be made in the teaching of literacy and the raising of standards, unless the above mentioned issue is sensitively and professionally acknowledged, examined and dealt with.

This writer concludes with the question – How effective can any programme for teaching and acquisition of literacy be, if all of the factors which impact on the personal and educational development of children, do not receive appropriate professional understanding, respect, acknowledgement and attention?

A CLASS MASCOT: AS AN AID TO LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM

The following submission describes how the use of a class mascot can aid literacy development.

The setting for this study is a rural village in the west of Ireland. Mixed farming is the main occupation though the land is poor in quality. Many acres have been planted in recent times and bogs are plentiful. The area is well served by industry and tourism is also important. There is a great tradition of music, song and
literature in the vicinity. The school is situated in the village but many of the children live in the surrounding district. All the fathers of the children are employed; 25% are farmers, 25% are self-employed and the others work in local factories, garages and services. 50% of the mothers also work, some of them part time. As it is a closely knit community, teachers are on first name terms with most of the parents and meet them incidentally on a regular basis – Mass, supermarket, funerals and social events.

The school has five class teachers and a shared remedial teacher. The school was built in the 1950's and later extended. It is presently in good repair with adequate heating and lighting. The school-yard/play area is small but in good repair.

The school recently acquired some computers and it also has a photocopier, television and video, tape recorders and projectors. The classroom is small in comparison to those in new schools and is barely adequate for the present class. The furniture is modern – tables and chairs for children – but it was designed for a larger classroom.

Participants

There are 20 children in the class; 9 boys and 11 girls. They all come from secure two parent families. The children are pleasant, eager to learn and anxious to please. They are imaginative, affectionate, talented and fun-loving. The parents are co-operative, helpful and supportive.

Outline of Approach

Three years ago, it was decided to try out the idea of a class mascot, an idea which was encountered in the book *Exploring Blue Highways*. Initially, it was envisaged that the sharing of a toy would help to form a bond between the children and improve
co-operation and cohesion within the group. It succeeded in achieving this aim but the effect the mascot had on the literary life of the classroom was far more striking. The children enjoyed taking the toy home in their turns. On returning to the classroom they wanted to share their experiences with the other children and it was almost a natural progression that their exploits were recorded. The procedure followed is simple: the child dictates the text, the teacher writes it on a prepared sheet of paper; the child is responsible for the picture and it is then put on display.

Rationale

The children are introduced to new vocabulary on a daily basis but they feel that they have a major input into the selection of this new material. The written word on display is meaningful to the children; they supply the text and the graphics, they feel ownership of it. They are involved in the creation of each new sentence, they are interested in it, they can identify with it and they read it for themselves and for others over and over again. The sentences build up into a word bank that is there for the children to refer to when necessary, for example, for identification of words in other contexts and for the spelling of words needed for creative writing.

Description of Procedure

The procedure followed is very simple and straightforward. In September as the new Junior Infants are settling in to school life, they are introduced to their class mascot. This is an inexpensive cuddly toy that is safe and washable. The class as a group decides on a name for the mascot and thereafter it is considered one of the group. Skippy is the current Junior Infants mascot and Tabby belongs to the Senior Infants. They take their mascot home for the night in their turn – this is decided by picking a name rather than in rotation, thus sustaining the element of surprise. They get an extra turn for their birthday. Having him for the weekend is
regarded as an extra bonus. When the children return with Skippy the next morning they are very anxious to share their experience with their friends, who love to hear Skippy’s latest gossip. The current Junior Infants refer to this sharing of experiences as telling their ‘Skippy secret’. One or two sentences are selected and recorded. These contributions are varied, imaginative and entertaining. Examples of these are as follows: ‘Skippy was watering the flowers’; ‘Skippy went out on the road’; ‘Skippy was playing with the computer’, ‘Skippy was hiding in the corner at dancing’. The child in question is responsible for providing a picture to suit the text. At times, they opt to draw the picture themselves. On rare occasions they search magazines for a suitable picture. On most occasions they select a child from Senior Infants to illustrate their secret. The sheet is then ready to be put on display and read and referred to as the occasion arises. The children are very interested in these displays. They can all remember who supplied each secret. Each child can read his/her own contributions. The majority of the children can read the contributions of the other children as well. Often as they encounter a new word they recognise it and remember that they already had it in a Skippy secret. Having vocabulary they can relate to and identify with, helps the children in their reading of class readers and also of library books. It also helps them in creative writing exercises, as many words they need are on display for them to identify and transcribe when necessary. The Junior Infants also compile books, using the class mascot as a character, as an aid to introduce new words from the reader e.g. ‘saw’. On the top half of an A4 sheet of card is written ‘Skippy saw’. A5 sheets of paper – one for each child in the class – are stapled to the bottom half of the sheet of card. Each child provides a picture of an object, which is then glued to the sheet of paper and the teacher writes the appropriate word. It takes approximately two weeks to compile each book. When completed, the children read it individually, aloud to the whole class or together in small groups.
When completed it reads as follows:

Skippy saw an aeroplane.
Skippy saw a train, etc.

Other examples of this type of book are

Skippy likes…
Skippy was in the…
Skippy plays with…

For the Senior Infants the procedure is different. They already have a wide range of vocabulary on display from the previous year. They also eavesdrop on the Junior Infants secrets and are often involved in drawing the pictures. They bring their mascot Tabby home in their turns and the next morning they share their ‘Tabby Story’ of five or six sentences with their classmates i.e.

- Tabby went home in the bus
- He was looking out the window
- He saw birds, flowers and a tractor
- Mammy said Hello to Tabby
- Tabby ate all his dinner.

Each sentence is repeated and the children discuss where they can source the words e.g:

home in Pat’s secret
bus ABC chart
looking in their class reader etc.

Any word that is not available elsewhere is written on the blackboard. The children have special Tabby copies where they record the stories and draw appropriate pictures. Having the vocabulary
they can relate to on display enables them to approach creative writing with an air of independence and confidence.

If, at times, they have an unusual experience to relate this is recorded and displayed, as with the Junior Infants. A recent example was ‘Tabby was listening to music’.

Effects
The effects of this procedure are worthwhile. Children are introduced to new vocabulary on a daily basis. It is accessible to them for reference as required. It helps them with their reading and also with their creative writing.

Reactions
Reaction to the class mascot idea has been very favourable. Parents are often obviously pleased when they see that their child has the mascot for the night. They are also very co-operative as they wash it as the need arises and often deliver it to school if forgotten in the morning rush.

Materials
Materials necessary for this procedure are minimal. An inexpensive cuddly toy that is safe and washable, A4 size sheets of paper and markers are the only requisites. As it is desirable to keep the print at a standard size, lines are drawn on one sheet and photocopied as required. A supply of old children’s magazines and catalogues are invaluable if children opt to search for pictures.

Advantages
This procedure is not unlike the Morning News. However, when relating the mascot’s experiences the children do not disclose or
discuss sensitive family issues.

Children are exposed to words and sentences supplied by themselves that they can relate to and feel ownership of.

It helps develop their memories: “We had that in Dan’s Tabby story” – possibly six months earlier.

It is an aid to oral development as the shared experiences provide topics for discussion, e.g. ‘Skippy went out on the road’ sparked a discussion on Road Safety. Children also get an opportunity to voice their ideas and describe their adventures in public. They are thus introduced to the concept of sharing their experiences with others.

It helps develop confidence and self-esteem in the children as it enables them to work independently at their reading and writing.

The children enjoy the whole experience. They love to bring the mascot home and they have a feeling of well-being and importance as their peers listen to their stories and experiences. They have a sense of pride as their sentences and pictures are put on display. They also experience a sense of achievement and self worth when they are capable of recognising words and of reading sentences on display. They develop a sense of responsibility as they enjoy being in charge of the mascot for the duration of his visit.

Difficulties

A major difficulty, especially with the Senior Infants is that it is time consuming as there are so many stages involved.

If a child does not get the opportunity to tell his story and have it recorded he feels deprived. The other children are also aggrieved as they enjoy listening to and recording these stories.
Other Adaptations

As it became obvious that involving the children in the selection and display of new vocabulary increases their interest in the written word and motivated them to read, an attempt was made to identify other areas of the curriculum where a similar approach could be utilised. Comhrá Gaeilge was one such area. When introducing new Irish vocabulary e.g. ‘Na Gréithe’ each child was given an A5 card and each selected a picture to draw – cup, spoon, plate, etc. They were then introduced to the relevant foclóir through the use of their own pictures:

Cad é sin? Sin cupán
Cad é sin? Sin spúnóg

These pictures are then kept in the classroom and can be used in other situations e.g. guessing games. Children also draw pictures to illustrate poems and rhymes in both languages. This is a great aid to learning and understanding new phrases and can also be used later to facilitate revision.

Conclusion

Sadly, each mascot becomes redundant after just two years of faithful service. They then take pride of place in the Toy Corner where they reminisce about the ‘good old days’ and regale the other toys with entertaining and amusing tales of their experiences!!

Bibliography

“WRITIN’S HARD, MISS”

The writer of the following submission raises some of the issues surrounding teaching children to write creatively another important aspect of literacy development.

“Writing is a very challenging task for many students with learning disabilities and they do poorly in situations that require written work”. (Lerner, 1997)

Teaching creative writing to children with learning difficulties can be problematic. An examination of their written work will reveal some, or all, of the following:

- paucity/confusion of ideas;
- a lack of focus;
- limited vocabulary;
- lack of conventions (punctuation, capitals etc.);
- poor structure and presentation;
- incomplete assignments.

Generally speaking, they are unenthusiastic about writing, perceive it as a tedious and tiring task and equate it with handwriting and spelling.

Establishing a framework within which they can produce a piece of good writing, by clear developmental stages, helps them to overcome their difficulties and develop writing confidence. I have found that poetry writing facilitates this. The writing process, (advocated in the 1999 Revised Primary School Curriculum) involves teaching skills of:

1. Planning
2. Drafting
3. Conferencing
4. Redrafting
5. Editing
6. Publishing
Redrafting meets the most resistance! Awareness that the finished product need only be 6-8 lines long overcomes it. Using a variety of forms helps sustain interest. I have used Couplets, Supermarket, Acrostic, Shape, Age, Number, Peter’s Pets, Furniture, Echo and Comers with 1st class – 3rd class, and those, plus Diamond, Haiku, Twisty, Inside-Outside, Alphabet, Time, Sustained Metaphor, Kennings and Question and Answer with 4th-6th.

Topics:
Topics for writing about are the first necessity. Broad categories could include:
(Choose anything, but do remember: ‘All writing begins in talk’.)

u People:
Self, family, relations, teacher, friends, heroes, both imaginary and real occupations.

u Surroundings:
Home – food, room, garden, pets, activities.
School – classroom, yard, activities.
Neighbourhood – shops, people, park, and church events, road.
Town – streets, traffic, shops, sights.
School – friends, subjects, teachers, activities, tours.
Play – sports, hobbies, experiences, and leisure time.
Occasions – birthdays, festivals, holidays, trips.
Reflections – fears, hopes, dreams, wishes, emotions, and shadows.
Life events – new baby, bereavement, separation, experiences.
Natural Environment – physical features: sea, sky, mountains, stars, sun.
**Country** – farm, life, and land.

**Flora** – trees, plants, flowers.

**Fauna** – animals, fish, birds.

**Weather** – all kinds, seasons, night, day.

Having chosen a category **narrow it down** to the specific for reflection e.g.

**Home:** my messy bedroom; making pizzas.

**Surroundings:** on the ‘Dart’/bus; In the school at night.

1. **Planning:**

   **Language:**

   Language to express ideas is the next necessity. Brainstorm it. Teach children to make concept/word webs quickly on a Planning Page. Put the title in the centre. They can add their own ideas during and after. Allow time for this.

   | Scared   | noise | dark |
   | Silence  | NIGHT | shadow |
   | Outside  | imagined | garden |

   Reading of poetry should help them to develop the commonplace, as poets will speak of ‘foam-rubber clouds’, bubbles as ‘technicolour sausages’ and the sea ‘chewing rocks’.

   To sharpen observation and to make language usage accurate, it is sometimes necessary to give very specific guidance e.g. ask for:

   Six verbs describing a footballer’s movements

   Ten adjectives describing street noises
Children now examine their web, underline the words/phrases they find most interesting and then look for links between them.

2. 1st Draft:
Children write it on the next page in their copy, writing on alternate lines only to facilitate changes. Words underlined in web are shaped into first draft, read, re-read, changed, re-sequenced etc. This page should be very messy if they’ve got the idea! To help the children develop an idea, make a chart of questions:

Who?  What?  Where?  When?
Why?  How?  Which?

Teach them to use it as a Helpline. e.g. The child has written ‘Dog barking’ asks himself Why? When? Where? Answers will supply the next lines of the poem.

3. Discussion / Conference:
Discussion/conference with partner/group/teacher etc. (as specified by teacher). Need to be taught how to comment constructively. Rule of thumb:

Say one nice thing about poem.
Make one suggestion to improve it.

Positive interactions at this stage help build writing confidence.

4. Re-draft:
Write 2nd draft incorporating changes, deciding on refrain, etc. Re-read. Delete unnecessary detail.
5. Editing:
Check spelling, punctuation and lineation. Establish a routine for this, e.g. child attempts spelling on scrap paper, shows it to partner /teacher. Use consistent editing marks e.g. p = punctuation, sp = spelling, / = denotes end of line.

6. Publish / Present:
Write final draft on new page in copy or separate sheet for display/ making book. Decorate it. Read to a friend, group, at home etc.

Forms and Formulae
The writer’s two problems – How to start and where to stop. Giving a pattern or formula solves these problems in advance. Here’s a selection to choose from:

1. A Diamond Poem: Shape the Poem

   Noun
   
   Verb
   Verb
   
   Adverb
   Adverb
   Adverb
   
   Adjective
   Adjective
   
   Noun

   becomes e.g. Football.
   exciting, challenging;
   skilfully, daringly, stupidly;
   fantastic, exasperating;
   Football.
2. Haiku: Concentrates on Syllables
5 syllables e.g. graceful butterfly
7 syllables e.g. petal to petal softly
5 syllables e.g. in garden sunshine

3. Acrostic: A number of lines of writing such as a poem in which the first/last letters forms a word
Frost
Freezing
Rime time
Overcast
Still white
Trees
Dog
Digs
Our
Garden

4. Couplets:
I saw a black cat
It found a grey rat

5. Alphabet:
(Choose a busy place e.g. town, school, seaside.)
A ate sausages;
B bounced a ball;
C clambered over the rocks;
D dived into blue water;
E examined the rock pools.

(Cheat on X, use explained, etc.)
Nice group exercise. Take a section each.
6. Shape Poems:
Draw a shape e.g. ice-cream cone, cake, firework, fizzy drink can, cloud, and bubbles. Write words in/ around it.

7. Q+A Poems:
Pick a feeling plus the five senses e.g. boredom, happiness, and sadness.
Ask yourself Boredom
What colour is it? It is grey and misty
What does it taste like? It tastes like cold coffee
What does it sound like? It is an engine on a long journey
What does it look like? It looks like a million words
What does it feel like? It feels like another rainy day in school
First word Boredom

8. An Echo Poem:
Pick phrases from the web. Repeat to form a sequence of events eg:
Coventry: I’m on my way
I’m on my way
Big Match
Big Match
Coventry against Arsenal
Coventry against Arsenal
The cup is ours
The cup is ours
9. Limericks:
5 lines with rhyming scheme (Difficult).
Possibly group activity. Needs a lot of pre-planning:

A
A
B
B
A

10. Sustained Metaphor:
The Sea
Snarling, stalking,
Pouncing, roaring,
Overturning, destroying
Smashing, tearing
and slowly
ebbing
away

11. Kennines:
Give descriptions. Don't mention actual topic until the end.
A fish home.
A ship holder etc.  
(The Sea)
12 Imperatives:

eg ‘Stop the Clocks’
Choose a list of orders suitable for an occasion,
Making a cake, going swimming, sports day etc.

13. Inside/Outside Poems: (Experience)
Bring a class for 5-minute walk. Ask what do you feel? hear?
think? see? and touch?

Go back in. Repeat questions. Write 2 contrasting verses.

14. Inside/Outside: (Objects)
Use kiwi, egg, crackers to pull, etc.
Describe inside.
Describe outside.

15. Inside/Outside: (People)
Outside I look brave ... She is beautiful
Inside I am shaking ... She is mean
You see me standing tall ... She is smiling brightly
Really, I feel small ... She is snarling angrily

16. Twisty Poems: (Twist in tail)
Classroom Diver Table
Wall Displays
Shining Desks
Neat Books
Teacher Ready
No Children  No water  No food!

17. Refrains/Chorus: (Song)
Describe an event, person.
Write verse. Repeat last line/s.
Or have a chorus.

18. Corners: (Use opposites)

Happy/Sad    Good/Bad    Real/Imaginary

In my happy corner I will put… (Choose 4-5 items)
In my sad corner I will put… (Choose 4-5 items)

19. Peter’s Pets
Choose a theme and stick to it. e.g. animals, cars, food, etc.

   In his bedroom Peter kept:
   Ten woolly sheep that filled the room…
   Nine black Labradors that howled at midnight…
   (And finish with a bang!)
   One Brontosaurus that…

20. Up and Down in Scale: (Size, temperature, time, etc)
A tiny field mouse on a stalk   Sub-zero, Antarctic snows
A small kitten curled up in the sun ..............................................
A huge .................................................................
An enormous   Desert heat on baking sands.

21. Age Poems:
When I was one, I…
When I was two, I...

22. **Initials Poems:**
Child uses own (or someone else’s) initials to make a poem e.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Santa</th>
<th>Claus</th>
<th>Weather</th>
<th>Guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sends</td>
<td>Cards</td>
<td>Wild</td>
<td>Gales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slices</td>
<td>Cake</td>
<td>Windy</td>
<td>Gusts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

23. **The Furniture Game:**
Think of a person. Invent Metaphors for him/her. What kind of:
furniture/bird/car/vegetable/building/animal is s/he?

24. **Alternative Preferences:**
I love ‘X’ / I hate ‘Y’

25. **Past and Present:**
I used to be …
but now …
I used to be nice to teachers, but now I’m cured, etc.

26. **Using Song Writing Structures:**
Six reasons to: be sad/be angry/be miserable/laugh/be grateful/be bored etc.

27. **Cinquain:** (5 lines)
One word (title)  
2 words (describe the title)  
3 words (describe an action)  
---

**Night**

**Quiet moonlight**

**Children funny, strange**
4 words (describe a feeling)  
"Shivers and excited giggles"

One (refer back to title)  
"Halloween"

28. Create an Alphabet or Counting Book in Rhyme e.g.

The letter A:
Five chicks in a nest, Rests all day, Take a little rest,
While letter B:
A swarm of six bees, Work like me, Flew around the trees.

29. Follow a Pattern

The ............... is ...............  
"The fog is grey"

As .................  
"As smoke rising high."

The fog is quiet  
As a cat is passing by.

30. Numbers: (Quite easy) e.g. Supermarket poems, shopping for a party, Christmas, Picnic etc.

First in the trolley goes bread and eggs.
Second a pound of sausages and beans.
Third some cakes and chocolate buns etc.

Or

One jar of jam full of strawberries.
Two cucumbers long and green.
Three bananas, yellow and ripe, etc.

31. Time:

At one o’clock we....
At two o’clock we.....
32. Associations: e.g. on ‘Hands’ and finish with a refrain

Good
Holding, giving
Clapping, praying
Cleaning, baking
Hands are good.
Hands are good.

Bad/Sad
saying goodbye.
grabbing, clawing.
strangling, hitting.

Other good themes are eyes, school, parents, animals, heat, mouths, and water.

33. Ezras
1st line from real world e.g. cat meowing to be let in
2nd line from imagination e.g. hinge that needs to be oiled

34. Comparison Lists: (The imaginative leap)
The wind at night is like,
An unhappy ghost seeking a lost love.
The sea on the rocks is like...
(Then drop the ‘like’. Hey Presto! A Poem!)

Finer points of rhythm, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, similes, metaphors and other poetic conventions can be introduced and practiced in turn if and when you consider the children ready.

Children with learning difficulties feel and experience like everyone else, and can express themselves with a freshness and honesty that can often surprise. Guiding them through the writing process for each type of poem undertaken, enables them to control the evolution of successful pieces of writing. This will help to develop
cognitive abilities, confidence and expression, as well as writing skills, which will transfer into other forms of writing. Poetry writing will help towards sentence formation and use of the writing conventions but these are better addressed in narrative writing. It may not produce ‘Art’ but it will certainly help practice the craft of writing.

**Promoting Literacy Through Literature**

The writer of the following submission teaches in a convent girls’ school in an urban setting in the Munster area. There are twelve teachers in the school; nine class teachers, a learning support teacher, resource teacher for children with special needs and an administrative principal. She has been teaching in the school for over twenty years. She has spent eighteen years teaching Junior and Senior Infants, First class and Second class. For the past two years she has been working as the learning support teacher. In her submission she emphasises the importance of using real books in promoting literacy skills.

In 1990, I travelled to Dublin weekly to study children’s literature and I have always had an interest in the development of literacy through this medium. At that time the Department of Education allowed me to absent myself from class for an hour each week in order to facilitate my travelling to Dublin. The condition that was attached to this was that I would undertake to give literature classes in the school at Senior Level. I have done this for several years now. At the moment I take a weekly literature/creative writing class with sixth class.

Works of literature can play an integral part in the earliest stages of a reading programme through a teacher’s practice of reading aloud. I have found that real stories and real characters are better vehicles for teaching reading comprehension than the class readers
and workbooks.

There are many different approaches to the teaching of reading through literature and I pursue the following aims through my weekly classes:

1. To promote the enjoyment of reading.
2. To expose the class to the joys of being read to aloud.
3. To engender discussion on the writing style, character development and use of language in the novel.
4. To encourage the pupils to produce a personal written response to the work.
5. To develop a critical skill in the pupils and an appreciation of good literature.

Early in the first term, I visit the class and we discuss the project. I explain that I will be reading a novel with them, which promotes a discussion on reading. At the end of this session I tell them that I will read an introduction chapter of a book in the next session and we will discuss if they would like to continue this novel.

This past year, I read Siobhan Parkinson’s novel *The Moon King* in the first term. The class were initially unsure if they would like to continue reading this novel but as we discussed the issue of children with special needs, and the loneliness which we all sometimes experience they agreed to continue with the novel and eventually loved it so much that they wanted to read another of Siobhan Parkinson’s novels. *Sisters – No Way!* was chosen as the second novel.

I choose to read the novel myself as I feel it allows the children to get involved with the story without having the pressure of wondering when it is their turn to read. I also feel that we tend not to read aloud to children as they get older and as I enjoy listening to stories being read, I feel they will also enjoy this. I do not let them...
take the novel home. We have one novel between two students and while I do the reading they follow the text in the book.

As their enjoyment of the story is my primary aim I tend not to overanalyse the content, particularly at the early stages. I ask them to keep a journal to write a very short summary, of the story we read each week. We discuss their feelings in relation to the characters and plot and I ask them to note any thoughts they may have in relation to the writing style. When we finish the reading of the novel, I then ask them to produce a project style response. Some of them choose to write summaries of the story, others are encouraged to write an evaluation of the plot, interview one of the main characters or write a short biography of a character or a report of some incident which occurred in the course of the novel, others choose to produce artwork based on the story. The computer is utilised as they use a word processor to produce the written responses.

The novel is usually finished in the first term and I continue to take the class in the second term, concentrating on developing their writing skills. I concentrate on getting them to produce stories and they are introduced to the technique of brainstorming as a method of discussing a variety of approaches to a title. We also work on the plan of the essay, which encourages them to think before they put pen to paper. Word processing techniques are developed in order to improve presentation skills.

In the final term, I read another novel, which they choose with me. This year, they chose to read a second novel by the same author as they enjoyed her style and also were impressed with the theme of the novel as they felt it was suitable for their age group! The discussions, which we have at the end of class, are now much more informed than they were early in the first term. The class have become more critical and I now find they are anxious to share their journals and I tend not to ‘correct’ their entries but to make a comment on what they have written. I had hoped that this
would become an interactive form of writing, but apart from one or two entries most have taken my comments without argument!

Each year, I find I learn a lot from this class and it is a very satisfying experience as I can see the development of the children’s oral and written work. Some of them have discovered a talent for writing in rhyme and are enjoying the experience, others have said they would like to read more of the author’s work and the universal response of the class is that they love having a story read to them. As one student remarked, “it gives me a chance to see the pictures in my head”.

Some teachers may wonder if it is possible to monitor a pupil’s progress in literacy by using this method without using workbooks or tests. Children can write book reviews on a book they liked, or did not like and teachers can also check the responses to the literature in the pupil’s novel journal. Teachers need to monitor the pupils’ responses to the material presented. Students who have been used to having only text-books during reading class come to realise that reading class is really about reading books. As children grow and develop, the teaching of the basic skills that make up the development of language – oral, reading and writing – is more easily achieved in an environment that offers the wide variety of language experiences that come with exposure to relevant literature.

**A Phonic Approach to Literacy**

The writer of the following submission has thirty two years teaching experience. In this submission she outlines the approach she has used successfully in teaching children to read and advocates the use of a phonic approach.

Day after day we hear about the high rate of illiteracy among our school leavers in Ireland. I would like to outline in my submission
a very simple approach to the teaching of literacy, which we have used in our school over the past thirty or so odd years. I’m afraid it won’t involve computers, expensive books or any other great resources. It doesn’t have any fancy names – it is just called learning to read by using straightforward phonics.

In 1968 I left Carysfort as ‘green’ as when I entered its ‘hallowed halls’ – took over a class of 46 girls – handed them their readers – read a page or two every day and thought I was ‘teaching’ reading. In those days we were trained in the ‘Look and Say’ method – so we looked and we said – those of us who could read already. However, I soon noticed that my ‘pink’ group were getting nowhere and I had no idea what to do with them.

In that same year an English trained teacher with 20 years experience joined our staff. The difference between the two systems soon became apparent as she had been trained to teach reading phonetically. Now, I have to say, phonics had been ‘mentioned’ in Carysfort. You taught your letter sounds – found out how many words began with ‘f’ and then left it all behind you when you began ‘the look and say’.

But back to the early 70’s. From this lady teacher already mentioned, I got a class of first standard girls. I was soon taken aback by the proficiency of their word attack skills – sounding out each letter at the beginning c-a-t and soon onto consonant digraphs, vowel digraphs, – magic e and the rest. These children were reading way ahead of their chronological ages. Weak readers progressed at their own rate – sounding out their words and not relying on anybody to tell them what the word was. I was converted immediately!

Dr S Machanick in *Alpha to Omega* says that phonetics is “the scientific study of speech sounds and linguistics is the scientific study of language. It is considered necessary to have a thorough knowledge of both these subjects in order to teach a language
skill.” Why then would we not teach phonetically? If we don’t we ignore one of the two main methods of teaching a language skill.

As I already said, the approach is very simple – we begin with our rhyming, sequencing and other pre-reading skills. We then launch into alphabet sounds and follow a very simple phonic scheme with very good results. Could I stress that phonics should be taught by all teachers to all children. Each section of the scheme should be mastered one by one. This teaches the child a self-reliant word-attack skill which is always available to a weak child. Remember s/he has very little recall methods and doesn’t have a good memory so a purely ‘look and say’ method may not suit the child with learning difficulties.

Another advantage of a phonic programme is the development of good – spelling skills. After initial attempts at ‘phonetic spelling’ in their free writing in junior classes our children soon began to use their phonic skills to spell with. If you know what sound a, n and d make, you will very soon be able to spell: and/hand/band/sand etc. Sceptics will tell you all words don’t sound, e.g. although or thoroughly, yes I know there are the odd few, and the few that do not follow the spelling rules, but there are exceptions to all rules Once you teach your few rules, e.g.

When two vowels go walking
the first does all the talking

One would be very surprised to find how close a child is to getting the proper pronunciation of a word if she sounds it as it should be sounded.

**Literacy and How I dealt with it at Infant Level.**

The writer of this submission, Kayren Hayes, member of INTO Equality Committee, stresses the importance of a
print rich environment and the use of everyday words in teaching children to read.

When we teach children how to speak we use normal language and they pick it up at their own rate, mostly informally. I believe that children should be exposed to words and reading in the same informal manner and not just on a few choice flashcards which are the key words from a selected reading scheme as this has a very narrow focus. Therefore, I begin with the environmental words and work my way onto general reading. The reading scheme is just one tool in the teaching of literacy in the infant class for me.

Begin with the words the children are most familiar with.

- Names of the children to be displayed on a chart on the door.
- Names of the children to be displayed on flashcards which the teacher shows the children.
- Names of the children to be displayed on clear labels, sellotaped onto the desk in front of each child.
- Names of the children to be put into a little book with a photo of each child on it. This book is made on week 1 by taking a photo of each child, developing same and writing their name under their photo. A copy of this book is made for each child.
- Naming common objects around the room verbally and putting a flashcard of the word on each one. Putting all these words on flashcards and showing them to the children and allowing them to point out where that word is in the room.
- Teaching the alphabet by name and by sound. The air of the song _Skip to my Lou_ used to teach the sounds in conjunction with a little colouring book. For example, Ants on the apple, a, a, a.
Sounding out words informally first and then in a more formal context as the children get to know their sounds and letters.

Making up stories, which are simple and of interest to the children either on charts or on A4 pages to copy. For example, if a child brings in a photo of herself with her dog pasting on a page and writing ‘This is Mary. This is her dog. The dog’s name is Fido.’ Then copying this page for the children and giving it to them as reading. The children have a lot of interest in this type of material because they can relate to it. I also make little books with this type of content for the children.

The News. To me this is the most valuable formal method of reinforcing reading. Even the weakest reader seems to know how to read the days of the week and simple facts about the weather. A sentence per day in Junior Infants develops to a paragraph by the end of Senior Infants. I know that this has come in for a lot of criticism, as it is not an end in itself but I believe that it has tremendous value and I also use the time that the children spend recording it for listening to individual reading.

Flashcards of the alphabet to be given out to each child along with an explanatory note to the parents. If these are copied on to card (about 8 letters per A4 page) and, cut out, they last for the year and if the parents write their child’s name on the back of each card the cards can be kept like a deck with an elastic band around them. A variety of colours when copying can ensure that each child at a table gets a different colour and this helps each child to mind his/her own set. I also use this method with flashcards; the names of all the children in the class (about 16 per A4 card); the key words in the reader; the environmental words in the class.

Library is essential to get children used to and interested in
reading. A good class library is essential. I always bring the parents in early in the year to explain and show them the library. Each child has a ‘library bag’ which is a plastic page with a fastening. They ferry the books to and from school in this and each child changes their book daily. The best books I have found have been the *Oxford Reading Tree; Ladybird Books*; and the Letterland books have great appeal also. But there are many, many other books and I have found that parents are most generous in donating a couple of books which their child has read when they see a new book coming home daily.

- Paired Reading: I introduce this in Senior Infants and the practice of taking a library book per day which was established in Junior Infants helps this to develop easily.

**Reading for Meaning**

The following piece was written by Brendan Culligan. In his submission Brendan offers some advice on analysing and dealing with reading failure and stresses again the importance of the teacher having a variety of approaches to hand. Brendan Culligan is currently a class teacher but was previously a Remedial/Learning Support Teacher in Bayside NS, Dublin 13 for many years.

Teachers of children with reading difficulties who do not have the support of a remedial/learning support teacher may feel isolated and unsupported.

We live in a society where reading is perceived as being of fundamental importance and a prerequisite of attainment in a child’s school-life. So why is it, that despite all the methodologies and reading schemes available, we still find such a significant failure rate in the acquisition of reading skills? Why is there such a difficulty for some children to progress from the purely mechanical
reading skills to reading independently and for leisure? One answer is that no particular method or reading scheme has all the answers... what may work for one child with specific reading difficulties may not automatically work for another. Thus, to persevere with an ineffective method may compound the failure rate and further lower the self-esteem of the child.

The answer to the latter question is more complex and much more perplexing for the teacher. It is crucial that, once a child is considered to have reading difficulties, the teacher knows what to do. Those without the backup of remedial/learning support service, and indeed those with the unsatisfactory service of just perhaps one day a week, feel isolated and unsupported.

Whatever the reasons for reading failure, whether:

- environmental – language of home (which may be very different to the language of books), frequent absence from and frequent change of school;
- behavioural – (these may be the cause or the result of failure);
- educational – particular learning deficits,

there will be a need to build up a profile of the child which will show his strengths and weaknesses. This may be done using a checklist and various tests. Such a checklist may contain such questions as; ‘Is his/her sight and hearing normal?’ ‘What is his/her language (both expressive and receptive) like?’ ‘Is there a big gap between his/her language and the language of books?’ ‘Does s/he articulate clearly?’ ‘Can s/he copy accurately from a book or from the black-board?’ ‘Which hand does s/he write with?’ ‘How strong is his/her sight vocabulary?’ ‘Does s/he have problems with visual or auditory memory?’ ‘Has s/he got sequencing difficulties?’ ‘Exactly what kind of mistakes does s/he make while reading to you?’

There are many tests available which can assist the classroom
teacher to determine whether the learning deficit is linguistic (Young’s Non Reading Intelligence Test), visual, or auditory (Aston Index), or indeed a combination of these. It is extremely important to determine the area of difficulty as the methodology and selected programme will depend on the child’s strengths (the child with an auditory deficit will not benefit from a purely phonetic approach as s/he may not be able to ‘hear’ differences in words such, e.g. ‘van’ and ‘fan’ and may be unable to rhyme).

Administering and analysing a word recognition test such as the Schonell Graded Word Reading Test may establish what the child’s word-attack skills are like. If this is a particularly weak area, further analysis of the child’s ‘phonic ability’ may be carried out by administering the Get Reading Right-Phonic Tests (Jackson).

Both these are word recognition tests where the pupil who may be experiencing difficulty will not have the benefit of contextual clues to lend assistance. The child will either know it from sight, use her phonic/syllabification skills to decode it or may not attempt it at all. For those who fit into this last category the starting point must be to eliminate the ‘fear of being wrong’ and emphasise the importance of ‘having a go’.

In order to complete the profile of the child, the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability may be administered. This will give an invaluable insight into the child’s reading accuracy, speed and comprehension. Obtaining a ‘reading age’ score on any test must be treated with caution as it is only an indication of ability and how you observe and analyse the test is more important. With this information the next stage will be to determine the type of programme that will most benefit the child – either a ‘top-down’ or a ‘bottom-up’ approach. With the former, paired/shared reading is a popular strategy.

No matter what programme is decided upon the role of the parents is crucial because we look to them to provide (where
possible) a suitable atmosphere and opportunity for their children to read. A paired reading programme, consistently carried out, will pay dividends and may be the ideal opportunity for the child to see that there is after all something enjoyable about reading.

To avoid frustration and negativity, the process will have to be rehabilitative. Accept the child as s/he is and begin at a stage a little lower than the level indicated in test results. If the child isn’t motivated by a particular book, why persist with it? Change it, let him choose one – many children are not at all interested in our choices! ‘The right book or poem at the right time’ can work wonders, but this is easier said than done. I find the BBC’s *Look and Read* stories to be particularly helpful in ‘moving’ the reluctant reader from the frustrational to the reading for fun stage.

Changing from a paired reading session at home to the ‘school reader’ in class can be helped if the teacher knows the readability level of each story. A general rule of thumb is that if the child is experiencing problems with one word in five, then the text is too difficult.

The reluctant reader will, if his difficulties have gone unchecked, adopt his own coping strategies. The child who relies solely on phonics will sound out every word, s/he may get from the capital letter to the full stop and may not be able to tell you what s/he has just read, some may not be able to cope without the use of a finger to keep him focused and read too slowly as a result, some become over anxious and have poor reading habits.

These children according to Frank Smith, in his book *Reading*, suffer from ‘tunnel-vision’. To overcome this he states that we must ensure that the reading material makes sense to them and that we must be their role model – “That’s great, you know all the words but this is how I would read it”.

Reading is difficult for many children. It cannot be taught using
isolated skills, e.g. phonic worksheets. It must be part of the school plan integrated with language, listening skills, and writing. We must show them how reading flows along. We read for meaning …no more, no less.

A Novel Approach

The following submission was written by Deirdre Goode, a Remedial/Learning Support Teacher, in St John’s Girl’s and Infant Boys’ School, Limerick. In her submission Deirdre describes how she devised a way of encouraging pupils to read for enjoyment which not only succeeded but also created an air of excitement in the school.

Ask yourself, why do you endanger your sanity and taunt your patience co-sounding D-O-G, M-A-T and exploring the fascinating world of Tara and Ben with your students? Are you educating them for the challenge posed by the array of letters in the instructions of a spaghetti packet, or are you serving a greater purpose? You are, in fact, doing both.

Therefore, when the concept of ‘Reading’ was being examined at a staff meeting, I was alert, intrigued. Its necessity alerted me but its importance intrigued me.

What I aim to impart as a teacher, like my colleagues, is a fundamental understanding and a genuine love of reading to my students. I regard it as an elementary skill whereas the modern student tends to reject it as unnecessary torture. This was the challenge with which we were confronted – altering the child’s perception of reading while developing a necessary understanding.

A discussion was prompted regarding library books, library councils, the value of reading aloud, yet, we found ourselves trapped within the confines of tired ideas and vague concepts. I
floated an original idea – a ‘book quiz’ – and, having attracted the attention of my colleagues, was forced to tease out an unpremeditated idea. I returned to the staffroom after a few weeks meditation, and painful brain exploring with a logical plan.
The purpose of my plan was to ensure that each student from second class to sixth class would read six books over a period of eight weeks. January and February were chosen as the reading months and a quiz was scheduled for March. It was necessary to divide the children into suitable ability groups – the Micra T’s were reborn! Books were selected and assigned to the various ability groups – able 5th and 6th classes students tackled list one, the less able list two, the trend continuing down to second class.

The selection of the books was quite a tedious task, as accommodating and stretching ability levels had to be combined with providing a gripping read. A challenging book would be included in each list, which the teacher would read aloud in class, thus encouraging the weaker student. *I am David* by Anne Holm was presented to challenge the best readers, as well as some of Roald Dahl’s more difficult titles. List two was made up of Roald Dahl titles and some Ladybird stories – *Black Beauty*. List three was chosen from *Young Puffin* while the youngest readers were facilitated by *Read it Yourself* Ladybird Stories.

They read. They really read. They read the words and were intrigued by the pattern of the story. We had to include extra titles for possible questions in the event of a tie!

Students from section four progressed forward to section three, section three students advanced to section two and so on, having tackled their respective lists. The sight of 200 ‘under twelves’ fervently dissecting lines of black print during lunchtime(!) was a fascinating experience – we savoured it!

I set the questions a few weeks in advance, deciding on eight rounds with eight questions per round. Two questions from each round would be rooted in an elementary understanding of the book.
On the day of the quiz, the children were divided into teams of four – one child from each section varying the levels of ability from each section within the teams. The first few rounds of the quiz maintained a certain equilibrium amongst the scores and it was the ‘sticky’ questions which finally presented us with our winners.

The atmosphere, feeling and general buzz in the school was quite extraordinary. Each child had achieved, developed, improved and won. They had experienced teamwork and solidarity. The prizes depended on Mary recalling the physical features of Roald Dahl’s Witches!

The highest scoring teams received Easter eggs and book tokens. We refused to let weeks of painstaking work on both sides fizzle out and be reduced to the memory of a school exercise. Smiles exuded from both teachers and students and ultimate satisfaction within the school was briefly touched on!

**CHILDREN’S LITERATURE IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Patricia Gallery teaches in St Kevin’s GNS, Kilnamanagh, Dublin 24. In her submission, Patricia describes how the teacher can play a key role in inspiring an interest in books, in the children they teach, which she hopes will last for life. Patricia believes that the end result of reading must be reading for enjoyment and in her submission she offers some advice to teachers on how to achieve that end.

Children’s literature is at the very centre of language teaching in the primary school. It is important to know what stories to read and tell pupils in the various standards. It is also essential to know how to do this effectively. Every teacher who knows what to read to children and how to read it is teaching literature. Every
school that has a range of popular books is assisting the process. When there is adequate time to read books and when strategies which develop children’s responses to them are in use, then children’s literature really starts to take off.

Telling stories is teaching. We must provide useful models of communication. The child who listens to stories will become competent in the art. This will be reflected not only in oral work but in the child’s writing. We must continue the work of story telling which ideally begins in the home or commence it. Sometimes story telling and reading become obsolete by the time a child can read with some independence. We should be sharing stories for both long and short term reasons. They should augment what has already taken place in the home, compensate for its absence in some family environments, provide a model for children where story telling and reading needs to be encouraged.

We must encourage children to be interested in these activities so that their language skills will develop more effectively. It is important to develop the skills required for story reading and telling - selecting and editing books. In the ideal primary school teachers will be constantly telling and reading good stories. It is important to work out a story programme between colleagues. This involves building up a list of books suitable for reading aloud – this can be adjusted from year to year. Book festivals and book week activities can be nurtured.

Children, by telling stories, get a grasp of story telling techniques ie

- there is a formal beginning;
- the characters are quickly established;
- the plot progresses logically;
- there is a formal ending.
This can be developed through the use of past tense, use of the third person, rhythm and fluency.

Response to literature is important. Learning how to read and reading for pleasure are not now regarded as consecutive activities. Both activities should go on at the same time.

Reading schemes even resemble normal books and pupils should also read a range of short attractive books at the same level. Modern approaches have encouraged a resurgence of the ‘real books’. Graded readers resemble mainstream fiction but, of course, I think if we were to dispense with them it would require a lot of indepth thought and planning.

Right from the start reading is now seen as a quest for meaning. Understanding the story is more important than decoding. It is important to outline how children can respond to fiction. They can:

- think about it;
- talk about it;
- write about it;
- respond in some visual way as an alternative to writing.

We sow the seeds of longterm response. We help to inspire an interest in books that will last for life. Response to literature is dependent on reading. If children have not time for reading then they will be responding to activities rather than books. Once reading fiction ranked third in order of importance. It came after writing and comprehension. The situation was – pupils read what they had to. Once a pupil was asked why he learned to read and he replied “So I can stop”. Teachers need to identify the essential approaches for developing response ie:

- talking about fiction;
- dramatising it;
o art representation;
o discussion on effectiveness of the story plot;
o characters.

All these encourage greater understanding. Visual representation can be used to develop sense of sequence.

Teachers require a good working knowledge of the best fiction for selection purposes. Many pupils fail to realise that reading can be a pleasurable experience. If a child makes three unsuccessful selections, s/he may regard reading as an experience which creates difficulty and failure. If you have no records, no one notices and action must be taken ‘just in time’. We must improve children’s powers of selection by asking them to read the:

1. summary;
2. introduction;
3. skim through book; another useful device is
4. using fingers on your hand to find difficult words which they cannot read or understand – if they require more than the five fingers of one hand on one page then the material is too difficult.

Book reviews can deteriorate into drudgery – only ask children to write what you need to know – of samples of book reviews.

Children take a positive approach if they see their success recorded.

Time to read is a very important factor. Books are of little use unless they are being read and that implies that time has to be set aside. Very often we have too much sound and not enough silence. Sometimes it seems as if silent reading is something that takes care of itself once children have mastered basic reading skills. Reading material must be generous. Silent reading (and, you can use various titles like ‘let the children read’, ‘drop every-
thing and read’ or ‘whole school reading’) should take place twice a week and should go from Infants to the most senior group. We may ask ourselves the question, ‘How do we know silent reading is working?’ The answer is:

a) If pupils read more frequently reading ability will improve.
b) Scope of reading improves – this is noticeable in simple records.
c) Attitudes towards reading improves.

Poetry is an integral part of children’s literature. Alternative fiction must be treated in a positive way and it was a mistake in the past to regard the two as rivals. Alternative forms of literature should be seen as an important part of children’s literature – by these I mean comics, cartoon books, radio, audio tapes and cassettes, films, television and videotapes. Treated in a systematic way alternative fiction complements rather than opposes literature.

A pupil once remarked “They must have taught me how to read because I was always reading any old rubbish. Trouble was they didn’t tell me what to read”. We forget how complicated book selection has become. There must be a range and balance in the selection. If there is not then children will not always read what they like or like what they read with any consistency. The various genres of fiction must be pointed out to them. Ivor Long suggested that a quick examination of the plot will provide a solution for grouping fiction: Animals, Home Life, Adventure, School Life, Mystery, Fantasy, etc.

Children view books in a different way to adults but Frank Whitehead’s study named Children’s Reading Interests categorised books in an interesting and economical way. They were either ‘Quality’ or ‘Non Quality’. A quality book is one that is well written, contains suspense and excitement and has a freshness of originality about it. Geoff Fenwick in his book Teaching Children’s Literature in
the Primary School warned about selection by author and its downfall. Nowadays we find a lot of children who know of no other author other than Enid Blyton or Roald Dahl and he outlines ways to avoid this pitfall.

An essential component for developing these ideas is finance for books but block loans from local libraries can be of some assistance. Courses in children’s literature should be more widely available. Guides to children’s books ie Irish Guide to Children’s Books, Lesley Reece, G Rosenstock, Puffin Guide to Children’s Books. I like this Story (Puffin), A Taste of Fifty Favourites Chosen by Kate Webb. Children’s Book Festival Magazines (CLAI) are an essential when selecting books.

Enjoying leisure time is important. The end result of reading must be reading for enjoyment so we need to ensure that is the end result.

**Self-esteem and the Teaching of Reading**

In the following submission, written by John Lally, John examines the links between self-esteem and the teaching of reading and he describes how classroom practice influences both the development of positive self-esteem and the acquisition of good reading skills. John teaches in St. John the Baptist Junior Boys School, Seafield Road, Clontarf, Dublin 3.

Whilst the debate on ‘skills’ v’s ‘whole-language’ approaches to teaching reading rages on, the literature on self-esteem suggests that other factors may in fact be more important.

Self-esteem, what is it?

Self-esteem is the individuals’ evaluation of the discrepancy between self-image and ideal-self. It is an affective process and is
a measure of the extent to which the individual cares about this discrepancy.

Self-esteem is a self-estimate of the difference between what we think we are (self-image) and the ideal-self. It begins in the family with the parents giving the child a sense of being loved or not loved, clever or stupid by verbal and non-verbal communication. The first and foremost antecedent of self-esteem is:

The amount of respectful, accepting and concerned treatment that an individual receives from the significant other in his life.

The advent of schools brings further experiences and the child learns whether s/he is popular, good at books, and that school-work is easily learned. A host of mental and physical characteristics are learned according to how rich and varied school life is.

**Ideal-Self**

Side by side with the development of self-image is the development of ideal self. The child is learning that there are ideal characteristics s/he should possess. There are ideal standards of behaviour and also particular skills which are valuable. The process begins with the family and continues on entry to school. Soon the child is comparing her/himself with others and eventually with peers. When the map drawn by the child’s parents is a realistic and accurate depiction of goals accepted by the larger social community and the means used to read them, it serves as a guide to the expectations, demands and taboos of that society.

The relevance of reading in the development of self-esteem is very obvious. Reading is such a powerful cultural tool that early
success at mastering it will almost inevitably enhance self-esteem and failure to do so will almost certainly lower a child’s self-esteem.

**Learned Helplessness**

Teachers of reading will be familiar with this manifestation of low self-esteem. A state of learned helplessness is reached when an individual perceives that s/he lacks control in obtaining a desired outcome. Thus in a reading context, a student who has failed repeatedly with a test and who construes the failures as a consequence of his/her lack of ability, will experience negative effect and a lowering of his/her self-esteem, and s/he will not expect to perform well on a similar task in the future. In particular s/he will perform more poorly after failure than before on tasks of equal difficulty, on another reader.

**Self-worth Theory**

In contrast self-worth theory states that in some circumstances students stand to gain a great deal by not trying. The self-worth theory is based on the notion that much of a student’s behaviour is designed to maintain a self-concept of high ability. To this end it is important to avoid failure whenever possible, since failure carries with it the implication of low ability. From this perspective it is clear that the application of effort under conditions of possible failure can be risky. If a student tries hard but fails, the suspicions of low ability are increased. A reduction on withdrawal of effort after a failure experience can, therefore, be used by the student as a strategy to prevent further damage to the students sense of self-worth. Teachers will know these pupils only too well. They are the ones who prefer to do nothing and risk teacher’s displeasure rather than risk lowering their self-image.
Pupil-Teacher Relationship

The importance of the pupil-teacher relationship is stressed throughout the literature on self-esteem and reading.
Teachers with high self-esteem themselves are more likely to enhance the self-esteem of their pupils. The results of one important study showed clearly that both the minimal use of private reprimands and the use of private praise statements were effective in increasing the on-task behaviour of school pupils by an average of over 20%.

**Improving Reading by Enhancing Self-Esteem**

One of the most authoritative writers on reading and self-esteem is former Somerset chief psychologist Denis Lawrence, now a member of staff at Churchlands College, Perth, Australia. He argues for good teacher-pupil relationships and communication, whole school approaches, a variety of classroom games and activities, counselling and role play drama.

**Games and Activities**

There are a host of classroom games and activities designed to enhance the self-esteem of children. The games and activities fall into four categories: trust activities; expression of feelings; positive feedback activities; and risk taking exercises. Whole school approaches and common aims are useful for high group morale. Finally, highly enjoyable activities such a school concerts, music, drama, art and craft and physical education can all be used to enhance self-esteem.

**Further information:**


Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Modern definitions of literacy refer to a skill which enables people to understand and employ printed information to develop their knowledge and potential. Surveys of literacy no longer divide populations into crude categories of literate and illiterate – instead they seek to identify a number of literacy levels. The question asked by studies nowadays tends to be – How well do you read? – rather than – Can you read?

Evidence from national and international studies indicate that literacy standards in Ireland compare unfavourably with the standards of other OECD countries (IALS, 1997, IEA 1992). The research also indicates that a significant number of Irish people fall within the lower range of literacy scales.

Empirical studies in the 1960s by McNamara (1966) and the Teachers’ Study Group (Kelly and McGee, 1967) suggest that literacy standards were low when compared with standards in England and Wales. Subsequent studies in the 1970s and 1980s by the Teachers’ Study Group and the Department of Education and Science suggested that there had been a significant increase in literacy standards in the 1970s. However, the last Teachers’ Study Group survey in 1984 and the 1988 Department of Education survey suggest that standards levelled out in the 1980s.

Irish studies have shown a strong relationship between literacy standards and social background. In every country children from disadvantaged backgrounds are at risk of educational failure. In some countries, children from less advantaged backgrounds achieve relatively high standards of literacy.
International studies suggest that factors which were associated with effective literacy teaching in some countries were of little importance in other countries. However, one factor may be an exception – availability of books/access to books was the most consistent predictor of success in literacy teaching in the most recent international survey of schools.

The teaching of reading and writing in Irish primary schools has, in general, been in line with pedagogical approaches in other countries at any given time except during the period when cultural nationalism led to the downgrading of the teaching of English.

The approach taken to the teaching of reading and writing in the 1971 curriculum was welcomed by the educational community as a significant advance in this area. However, there is evidence that a number of factors including large classes and lack of inservice and resources constrained teachers in their efforts to successfully implement the methodologies advocated in the curriculum.

The Revised Curriculum (1999) appears to contain all of the elements of good practice in literacy teaching and learning as indicated by recent research.

Large scale early intervention programmes such as the Head Start project in the USA have shown evidence of both short and long-time gains for disadvantaged children, even though earlier evaluations were negative. However, there is evidence that pre-school interventions need to be supported by family literacy initiatives to help parents who themselves have low levels of literacy.

Projects which involve parents in children’s literacy learning have been seen to be successful. Projects based on the Paired/Shared Reading (and recently Paired Writing) seem to produce short-term and long-term gains in literacy.
Some well known school based intervention programmes for at risk pupils appear to have been successful. The Success for All programme in the USA has produced impressive results with children from disadvantaged backgrounds. New Zealand’s Reading Recovery programme also appears to have produced both immediate and long term positive effects for children in the programme. Restructured Chapter 1 – an approach in the USA based on the methods used in Reading Recovery but with small group tutoring rather than one to one tutoring – has been found to be more effective than the original Chapter 1/Title 1 programmes but it is fair to conclude that additional research into the effects of this programme is required.

The clearest lesson of the US experience is that early intervention is essential and that the longer that intervention is delayed the greater the risk of literacy difficulties persisting into adulthood.

Traditionally the Irish Remedial/Learning Support Service has always discriminated against pupils in smaller schools. In the past the majority of schools without a Remedial/Learning Support Service were small rural schools and many of the smaller schools which had a Remedial/Learning Support Service were often offered very limited provision. Since September 1999 a remedial service is available to all schools but it is important to state that there is little value in such provision unless it is effective. To be effective the intervention needs to occur earlier rather than later, be intensive, small group or individual on a daily basis.

The Department of Education and Science’s policy on Remedial/Learning Support Education in Ireland recognises the importance of the principles of prevention, intensive, early intervention, whole school approaches, the involvement of parents and effective professional development programmes on literacy difficulties for teachers. However, research has revealed a number of areas where practice does not reflect policy.
The effectiveness of the Remedial/Learning Support Service in primary schools is adversely affected by excessive caseloads, an overemphasis on withdrawal of groups of children and insufficient emphasis on a collaborative approach involving principal, class teacher remedial/learning support teacher and lack of suitable accommodation.

Professional development courses for Remedial/Learning Support teachers have been available since 1967 but there is still a sizeable minority of teachers who have not attended these courses. There is no structure for further professional development of teachers who have completed initial courses but Remedial/Learning Support teachers attend voluntarily at courses during vacation time. There is also a need for professional development courses for all teachers and principals in relation to literacy difficulties and whole school approaches to solving literacy problems.

Selection criteria for Remedial/Learning Support provision is an important policy area and one which has created difficulties for Remedial/Learning Support teachers in the past. In the future priority will be given to pupils who are performing at or below the 10th percentile but schools will ultimately be able to exercise flexibility in relation to selection.

The links between Remedial/Learning Support teachers, principal teachers, class teachers and parents of pupils in receipt of remedial teaching in Ireland are not sufficiently strong in some cases to support the work of Remedial/Learning Support teachers, and to maximise its effects.

The intensity of the intervention provided in the school clusters is being hampered by the large number of schools in some of the clusters.

Recommendations
1. Schools should devise whole school policies on approaches to literacy and Remedial/Learning Support Education. The policy should be continuously monitored and reviewed.

2. The implications of broadening the work of Remedial/Learning Support teachers to include a stronger consultative role should be examined.

3. Schools should be assisted in the implementation of the methodologies proposed in the Revised English Curriculum through the provision of adequate resources and through ongoing comprehensive, professional development programmes.

4. Given that access to books was the most consistent predictor of success in literacy, schools should be given appropriate funding for the purchase of books. Children should be exposed to a range of children’s literature from which they can read aloud or silently. The development of personal reading is underpinned by the class, school or public library through which interests can be pursued. Information technology can be used to increase motivation and enhance reading development.

5. Schools should be assisted in developing parental involvement in reading programmes.

6. The principles of prevention and early intervention should underpin Remedial/Learning Support provision. The Department of Education and Science should continue to develop early intervention programmes in Language/Maths.

7. Levels of provision of Remedial/Learning Support teachers should be reviewed on a regular basis.
8. The duration of Remedial/Learning Support Education should not exceed two to three years for the majority of pupils but in a minority of cases where ongoing additional support is needed this should be provided.

9. The caseloads of Remedial/Learning Support teachers should fall to a level that enables them to implement an intensive, early intervention programme and also enables them to perform other support activities effectively. The INTO recommends that a caseload for a remedial teacher should comprise no more than 30 pupils.

10. The Department should plan for and provide inservice training to Remedial/Learning Support teachers on an ongoing basis. Inservice training on Remedial/Learning Support Education should also be provided to all class teachers and principals on an ongoing basis. The number of places on courses should be monitored and adjusted in the light of need.

11. The grant to Remedial/Learning Support teachers should be increased annually in line with increases in the cost of educational materials. The Department should make additional funding available to Remedial/Learning Support teachers to coincide with new initiatives and programmes.

12. Suitable accommodation for Remedial/Learning Support teaching should be provided in all schools.

13. No school cluster should comprise more than three schools.

14. A number of teachers should be facilitated by the DES to study developments in other countries with a view to reporting how different programmes might be employed (or adapted for use) in Ireland.
15. Action based research should be undertaken on approaches to the teaching of literacy which could actively address some of the challenges raised for the profession by the findings of both the literacy surveys and the recommendations contained in the *Report of Remedial Education* in Irish primary schools. The research could explore the following issues.

16. The early factors which indicate to teachers that a child might be at risk of developing literacy problems:

- how diagnostic assessment tools are used;
- the development of an Irish based early screening test for learning difficulties;
- how teachers can best adopt the approaches to the teaching of literacy recommended in the revised curriculum;
- how the principles of prevention and early intervention can effectively be implemented;
- the issues of gender differences in literacy attainments;
- the factors/ if any which make approaches to literacy in Ireland different from other countries;
- multi-faceted approaches to improving levels of literacy;
- the particular challenges presented to teachers who work in areas of disadvantage, multi class situations or who work with refugee and other non-national children in relation to the teaching of literacy.
The Special Education Review Committee was established in August 1991. Its terms of reference were as follows:

To report and make recommendations on the educational provision for children with special needs in respect of:

(a) the identification of children with special needs and their assessment with a view to determining the educational provision best suited to the needs of each child;

(b) the arrangements which should be in place in order to provide for the educational requirements of such children through complete or partial integration in ordinary schools, through special classes in ordinary schools or through special schools or other special arrangements, in accordance with the circumstances, as assessed, of each child;

(c) the range of support services which may be required and in particular the future relationship between remedial teachers, other support-teachers and ordinary class teachers;

(d) The linkages which should exist with other Departments of State and services provided under their aegis’ (p15).

The Committee was drawn from the relevant education partners and began work in September 1991. Written submissions were received and a survey was undertaken to estimate the number of pupils with disabilities and special needs in ordinary classes in primary schools.

The report, published in 1993, contains the following recommenda-
tions which are relevant to the remedial service:

(a) The following conditions should be adopted as general criteria for establishing and retaining remedial posts:

(i) that the overall level of pupil need in the relevant school or cluster of schools be sufficiently great;

(ii) that the 10th percentile on standardised tests, or its equivalent, be the inclusion threshold for the purposes of implementing recommendation (d) below, until such time as a remedial service for that proportion of pupils is available to all schools;

(iii) that a caseload be comprised of 40 pupils, or 30 ordinary pupil equivalents in first or second level, having a score or below the 10th percentile on standardised tests in basic literacy or numeracy, or their equivalents;

(iv) in those cases where the remedial post is to provide a service to a cluster of schools, that the forty pupils required be reduced by two for each school which is additional to the base school, subject to a maximum reduction of eight pupils;

(v) the Department of Education and Science should allocate additional teaching hours and other resources to second-level schools which make remedial provision from their in-quota allocation of teaching hours;

(vi) in exceptional circumstances where no other support teaching service is available, that a pupil with a disability who meets the criteria for special enrolment be countable as a multiple in accordance with the agreed weighting for the purposes of establishing and retaining a remedial teaching posts;
that consideration be given to any proposals from a
school regarding the manner in which an additional
post would be incorporated into the organisation and
delivery of a remedial service;

that account be taken of other relevant factors, such as
the actual pupil-teacher ratio obtaining in the
school/s concerned, the number of pupils, grades,
and subjects being taught by individual teachers, the
use to which any discretionary staff hours are being
put and of any other special circumstances which
affect the school’s capacity to make appropriate
provision for those among its pupils who have special
educational needs;

(b) the basis for the allocation of remedial posts should be
reviewed biennially by the Department;

(c) supplementary remedial teaching should be made available
on a phased basis to all pupils who require such help,
irrespective of age, of ability and of the size or geographical
location of the schools in which they are enrolled;

(d) the remedial teaching service should continue to be expand-
ished on the basis of priority of need, with a view,
initially, to providing supplementary remedial teaching to
all pupils at first level and second level, who score at or
below the 10th percentile on standardised tests of basic
literacy or numeracy or who perform at an equivalent level;

(e) provision should be made initially for 310 additional posts
at first level with a view to providing a remedial service to
all ordinary national schools similar to that which is already
being provided in larger schools;

(f) provision should be made initially for 226 additional posts
at second level with a view to providing a remedial service
to all second-level schools similar to that which is already being provided in some schools;

(g) a school in which a remedial post has been sanctioned should be required to allocate the equivalent in hours of a full teaching post to remedial programmes;

(h) a review of the deployment of existing remedial posts should be undertaken:

(i) in first-level and second-level schools, with a view to adjusting the level of provision in individual schools in line with the level of need, as necessary;

(ii) in second-level schools, to confirm that they are being utilised in line with the conditions under which they were established;

(i) the procedure regarding arrangements by national schools for the identification and assessment of pupils with special needs should, where applicable, specify a screening procedure for use with pupils during their last term in Senior Infants in identifying the extent and nature of learning difficulties;

(j) index-linked grants for teaching materials and tests at the rate of £500 for the first year and £250 for subsequent years should be payable to all schools in which the staffing allocation includes a remedial post, and pro-rata grants should be payable to schools which make remedial provision on a part-time in-quota basis;

(k) the rate of grant applicable where the services of a remedial teacher are shared between two or more schools should include an additional £100 in the first year and £50 in subsequent years in respect of each school additional to the base-school;

(l) remedial teachers should be encouraged not to restrict themselves to a withdrawal model of work-organisation. Where appropriate, schools should be encouraged to imple-
ment adapted curricula and to adopt a flexible approach to school-organisation, including team-teaching, in order to meet their particular needs;

(m) the DES should undertake or commission research into the operation and effectiveness of the remedial teaching service;

(n) the involvement of parents in the remedial programmes being followed by their children should be actively encouraged by schools at both levels.
In November 1996, the Department of Education and Science commissioned the Education Research Centre (ERC) to conduct a study of remedial education in primary schools with the services of at least one remedial teacher. An advisory committee of the appropriate educational partners was set up and it was decided to conduct four studies:

(i) A survey of remedial teaching in schools.
(ii) A study of the class and remedial programmes in English for pupils in remedial classes.
(iii) An analysis of supplementary data on the participation of pupils in remedial classes.
(iv) A follow-up study of pupils in receipt of remedial teaching in English.

The final report of the study was published in September 1988 and a copy of a summary of the report was sent to each school. The report is the most comprehensive ever on Irish remedial education and 20 conclusions based on the study were drawn. The report also makes recommendations for the future of the remedial service.

In summary, the conclusions that pertain to literacy are:
• Pupils, in general, benefit from remedial teaching in English but a considerable minority – mainly pupils with severe problems and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds – do not make sufficient progress within a reasonable period of time to enable them to reintegrate into their own classes without further support.

• The aims of remedial education and their implications for selecting pupils are unclear, there is considerable variation in provision across schools, schools use a wide range of cut-off points for selection and the duration exceeds four years for the majority of pupils in receipt of remedial teaching.

• Many remedial teachers have very large caseloads.

• Remedial teachers spend little time in a consultative role.

• Links between remedial teachers and parents are not sufficiently strong and links between remedial teachers and classroom teachers are not well-established.

• A significant minority of remedial teachers have difficulty getting places on sanctioned courses on remedial education and the Department does not provide ongoing inservice training and support for remedial teachers.

• Pupils receiving remedial education on a shared basis receive less remedial teaching than pupils in schools with a non-shared service, some shared teachers spend a considerable amount of time on excessive travel between schools and accommodation for shared teachers is frequently inadequate.

• A majority of remedial teachers consider the annual remedial grant to be inadequate.

• A minority of pupils in remedial classes have diagnosed disorders.

• Many schools do not have a written policy document on