Irish Teachers' Journal

Volume 2, Number 1
November 2014

into
Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Irish Teachers' Journal

Editor

Deirbhile Nic Craith, Irish National Teachers' Organisation

Editorial Board

Sheila Nunan, *General Secretary*
Noel Ward, *Deputy General Secretary*
Peter Mullan, *Assistant General Secretary*
Deirbhile Nic Craith, *Director of Education and Research*
Lori Kealy, *Communications Official*
Claire Garvey, *Administrative Officer*

Editorial Assistant

Claire Garvey, Irish National Teachers' Organisation

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Dr Deirbhile Nic Craith, Irish National Teachers' Organisation, Vere Foster House, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin 1.

Design

David Cooke

Layout

Selina Campbell, Irish National Teachers' Organisation

ISSN 2009-6860 (Print)
ISSN 2009-6879 (Online)

© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation

Irish Teachers' Journal

Volume 2, Number 1
November 2014

CONTENTS

1 Editorial *Sheila Nunan, General Secretary*

5 Author Notes

7 Curriculum politics and practice: from 'implementation' to 'agency'. *Anne Looney*

15 The challenge of supporting literacy in a digital age: perspectives of Irish primary school teachers. *Duncan McCarthy and Brian Murphy*

32 An exploration of formative assessment practices on children's academic efficacy. *Carol Constant and Tracey Connolly*

47 An evaluation of the utility of homework in Irish primary school classrooms. *Joanne Jackson and Lorraine Harbison*

63 The challenges, dilemmas and opportunities associated with implementing inclusion in an Irish primary school: the school stakeholders' perspective. *Conor Mulcahy*

73 Nationalism, prejudice and intercultural education. *Anne Horan*

85 Becoming a primary school principal in Ireland: deputy principalship as preparation. *Derek Grant*

into
Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Vere Foster House
35 Parnell Sqsuare
Dublin 1

Telephone: 01 804 7700
Email: info@into.ie
Web: www.into.ie
Mobile web: m.into.ie

General Secretary: Sheila Nunan

Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann
Áras Vere Foster
35 Cearnóg Pharnell
Baile Átha Cliath 1

Guthán: 01 804 7700
Ríomhphost: info@into.ie
Gréasán: www.into.ie
Suíomh móibíleach: m.into.ie

Árd Rúnaí: Sheila Nunan

IRISH TEACHERS' JOURNAL, Volume 2, Number 1, November 2014. ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print). ISSN: 2009-6879 (Online).

The *Irish Teachers' Journal* (www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/IrishTeachersJournal) is a peer-reviewed journal published annually by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, Vere Foster House, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin 1.

The journal is distributed to all primary schools in the Republic of Ireland and primary and post primary schools in Northern Ireland.

It is also available as a free download from the publications section of the INTO website at www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/IrishTeachersJournal.

Copyright information

Copyright © 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, transmitted, or disseminated, in any form, or by any means, without prior permission from INTO, to whom all requests to reproduce copyright material should be directed.

The INTO grants authorisation for individuals to use copyright material for private research activities, classroom or organisational instruction and related organisational activities, student assignments or as part of a scholarly, educational or cultural presentation or workshop.

The INTO allows use of links to facilitate access to the online version of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. The journal may be downloaded to view, use or display on computer or personal digital device.

Enquiries to Education Section, INTO, Vere Foster House, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin 1. Email: info@into.ie. Tel: 00353 (0) 1 8047700.

For more information please visit: www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/IrishTeachersJournal.

Submitting a paper to the Irish Teachers' Journal

For information about writing an article, preparing your manuscript and general guidance for authors please contact the Education Section of the INTO at tel: 00353 (0) 1 8047700 or email: info@into.ie or visit: www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/IrishTeachersJournal.

It is a condition of publication that authors assign copyright or licence the publication rights in their articles, including abstracts, to the INTO. Authors themselves are responsible for obtaining permission to reproduce copyright material from other sources.

Disclaimer: The INTO make every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the 'Content') contained in our publications. However, the INTO make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by the INTO. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. The INTO shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

Editorial

The INTO is delighted to publish the second edition of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. The journal was launched in 2013 for the first time, to provide an opportunity to teachers to bring their research findings to a broad audience. The purpose of the journal is to stimulate thinking and reflection on current educational issues among the teaching profession.

The INTO's strong tradition of being both a trade union and a professional organisation for teachers – primary teachers in the Republic of Ireland and nursery, primary and post-primary teachers in Northern Ireland – places the Organisation in a good position to facilitate and provide a means of expression of teachers' collective opinion on matters affecting the interests of education and of the teaching profession, as per the *INTO Rules and Constitution*. The publication of a teachers' journal provides an additional vehicle for the voice of the profession to contribute to current debate in education. Articles written by teachers, for teachers, demonstrate a commitment to professional engagement that is at the core of teacher professionalism in Ireland.

As Ireland's economy begins to grow again following a sustained period of decline the time for re-investing in education has come. There are many priorities including class size, leadership, special education, disadvantage and small schools. Education cutbacks have taken their toll. Child poverty is on the increase. Class sizes are bigger – one in four children is in a class of 30 or more children. Inclusion is under threat due to a lack of resources. Nevertheless, teachers remain committed to their profession. Their commitment to the moral purpose of teaching is resilient, as they seek to improve the educational experience of their pupils. Teachers continue to enhance their own professionalism through their engagement with school self-evaluation, self-reflection, and professional development. Teachers are participating in the piloting of new induction and probation models. Teachers are working with colleges of education to enhance the experience of student teachers on school placement. Teachers continue to engage with educational change endeavouring to shape developments to ensure educational changes are in the best interests of pupils and of the profession. The *Irish Teachers' Journal* is an acknowledgement of the high regard in which teaching is held in Ireland. The contributors to this journal illustrate teachers' motivation to enhance their knowledge of teaching, thereby ensuring that teaching continues to be an attractive profession.

Following an open invitation to members, the INTO received a number of articles for consideration for the journal. All articles were reviewed by external experts who provided constructive feedback to the authors. Authors resubmitted their articles having taken on board reviewers' feedback. The INTO invited Dr Anne Looney, Chief Executive of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), to write the guest article. Dr Looney has extensive experience in curriculum development in Ireland and is currently on sabbatical leave having taken up a position for the current academic year as a Professorial Research Fellow in the Learning Sciences Institute in Australia.

✉ Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

In her article, Dr Looney describes the complexity of curriculum development. She outlines how curriculum can become a political battleground in some countries and is not a linear process of curriculum design followed by implementation. How students experience curriculum may often differ from curriculum aims. She argues that there is less political influence on curriculum matters in Ireland, due to the existence of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment which has a brief to advise the minister on curricular policy. The NCCA is a representative structure which is not true of curriculum councils in other countries. Dr Looney explores some of the criticisms of this approach to curriculum and outlines other forms of consultation involving teachers in classrooms, for example working with a network of schools and www.curriculumonline.ie. Now that the Primary School Curriculum (1999) is being revised, Dr Looney's article makes for interesting reading in how curriculum comes about.

In addition to the guest article, this edition of the journal contains six articles written by teachers, addressing six topics of relevance to teachers today. It is not surprising that literacy, assessment and homework feature as these are issues that impact on all class teachers today. The other three articles focus on whole school issues – special education, intercultural education and leadership – aspects of education that impact on a whole school.

Duncan McCarthy and Brian Murphy write about the perspectives of Irish teachers in supporting literacy in a digital age. They outline new understandings of literacy and describe online reading strategies. They highlight the challenge of making classroom literacy meaningful in a digital age. Their small scale study of approaches to digital literacy among a group of teachers provides the data for his description of current practices and the identification of barriers to creating effective digital literacy classrooms. It is clear from this study that there is policy-practice gap and they suggest investment in teacher professional development.

Carol Constant and Tracey Connolly explore formative assessment practices on children's academic efficacy. In their article, they outline the current policy position regarding assessment and current understandings of formative assessment. Their own research focused on investigating and developing formative assessment strategies in primary school classrooms from a practical perspective. They carried out a pre-intervention and a post-intervention study, with a view to studying the impact of the introduction of formative assessment practices in a classroom on pupil learning, particularly pupils' academic efficacy, motivation and eagerness to learn. They conclude that formative assessment practices can have a positive impact on pupils' academic efficacy and eagerness to learn.

The utility of homework in Irish primary school classrooms is the topic of the third article. Joanne Jackson, with Lorraine Harbison, examines current practice and the effectiveness of administering homework in Irish primary schools. A brief overview of the literature on homework is provided. A questionnaire was issued to a convenience sample of 90 parents seeking their views on homework and the findings of this questionnaire are presented. An interesting finding is that parents are not always aware of a school's policy on homework. Of some concern, perhaps, is the finding that a high percentage of parents express the view that homework can cause friction in the family. This is an interesting study that provides some food for thought for primary teachers.

The realities of inclusion in a small primary school are presented in Conor Mulcahy's article. Conor carried out a small scale study which explored the perspectives of school leaders, teachers and special needs assistants in relation to the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. He outlines the challenges, the dilemmas and the opportunities in relation to inclusion. He highlights the challenges teachers experience in adopting a policy of inclusion, particularly the changing of attitudes over time. He also refers to dilemmas around the use of resources and suggests that professional development for teachers in relation to inclusion provide opportunities to enhance the educational experience of all children.

Anne Horan's article offers an interesting perspective on intercultural education. She introduces her article by outlining the changing educational landscape in Ireland. She describes current initiatives such as the publication of intercultural guidelines and language supports and acknowledges their limitations. She draws on the ideas of cultural nationalism, cultural pluralism and the works of Herder, a German philosopher of the 18th century, to help explain some of the challenges experienced by Irish society, including teachers, in addressing interculturalism. As Ireland becomes a more diverse society, reflected also in the school population, Anne's articles provides some thought-provoking ideas about culture, nationalism and intercultural education.

The final article addresses school leadership, focusing specifically on the experiences of deputy principals. Derek Grant explores the roles of principals and deputy principals in management and leadership in schools. His study examined, through interviews, deputy principals' construction of school leadership. Derek argues that little attention has been paid to the role of deputy principal and to preparation for principalship. He offers three typologies of the deputy-principals' role and suggests a more planned and structured approach to the transition from deputy principal to principal. At a time when school leaders face increasing workloads, Derek offers interesting perspectives regarding the potential of the deputy principal's role.

Articles in this journal reflect the views and opinions of the authors, and not those of the INTO. All authors have provided stimulating thoughts and ideas for the consideration of their teaching colleagues. The INTO is delighted to provide an opportunity to teachers to bring the fruits of their research to a broad audience through the publication of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. Teachers' engagement in further study and high-quality research can only enrich discussions and professional conversations among teachers. The INTO wishes to thank all teachers who contributed articles, and hopes that many more teachers will do so in the coming years.

Sheila Nunan
General Secretary

Author Notes

Anne Looney

Dr Anne Looney has been CEO of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Dublin for over a decade. Prior to joining the NCCA, she worked as a post-primary teacher of religious education and English. She is a graduate of the Mater Dei Institute in Dublin and holds a Doctorate in Education from the Institute of Education in London. She has published on assessment policy, citizenship education, education and school policy, and school values and ethos. Among other recent work, she delivered Ireland's inaugural World Teachers' Day lecture, and participated in an OECD external review team. Anne is currently on a sabbatical year in Australia.

Duncan McCarthy and Brian Murphy

Duncan Mc Carthy is a mainstream primary school teacher. In 2012, he graduated with a Masters in Education from University College Cork, where his research explored literacy development in the digital age. He has presented this work at a number of conferences including those organised by the Reading Association of Ireland and Educational Studies Association of Ireland. Duncan's research interests include literacy, continuous professional development and integrating technology into the learning environment.

Dr Brian Murphy is a senior lecturer in the School of Education, UCC where he is course leader for the new Professional Masters in Education initial teacher education course. His research interests are in the areas of policy and pedagogy in the language and literacy areas.

Carol Constant and Tracey Connolly

Carol Constant is a teacher in Cork. Carol completed her B.Ed. in Mary Immaculate College and was awarded an INTO bursary for her M.Ed. research which she undertook at University College Cork.

Dr Tracey Connolly is a lecturer at the school of education, University College Cork. Tracey's research areas are assessment practices in education, inclusive education and the history of Irish education.

Joanne Jackson and Lorraine Harbison

Joanne Jackson is an honours graduate from the Church of Ireland College of Education. She teaches in St Andrew's NS, Lucan. Joanne's educational interests are special needs and the arts curriculum. She is currently involved with the CRAFTed Art Programme.

Dr Lorraine Harbison is a graduate from St Patrick's College and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. She lectures in mathematics education and ICT in CICE. Her research interests involve promoting mathematical understanding for all.

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

Conor Mulcahy

Conor Mulcahy is a primary school teacher in Cork City. He holds a B.A. in English and History, Higher Diploma in Primary Education, and is currently an M.Ed student in University College Cork.

Anne Horan

Anne Horan is from Glin, Co Limerick, and is a teaching principal in a three teacher school in Carrickerry, Co Limerick. Her educational qualifications include a B.Ed, B.A., M.Ed. and a Post Graduate diploma in the teaching of primary science. She is a Doctoral student in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. Anne's area of interest is intercultural education, and the experiences of immigrant (newcomer) children and their families within our educational system.

Derek Grant

Dr Derek Grant graduated from Trinity College Dublin with a first class honours degree in education (2002). He was conferred with the degree of Master in Education Management from the University of Ulster (2009). He holds a Doctorate in Educational Research and Development from the University of Lincoln, England (2013). As part of this degree, Derek completed research on the role of the deputy principal and principal in Irish primary schools set within the paradigms of role theory and distributed leadership. He is currently a teaching principal in Kilmore Central NS, Cavan.

Curriculum politics and practice: from 'implementation' to 'agency'

ANNE LOONEY

Abstract

In recent times, the school curriculum has become something of a political battleground across a number of countries. This paper looks at the complex and fraught relationships between the school curriculum and government in England, Wales and Australia, before looking at the Republic of Ireland. To map these relationships, three different perspectives on curriculum (from the myriad available in curriculum scholarship) are used – the technical, the process and the practice.

> *Nothing appeals to a politician so much as the chance to rewrite a curriculum. He would not dare operate on a brain tumour or land a jumbo jet or design the Forth Bridge. But let him near a classroom, and the Jupiter complex takes over. He goes berserk. Any fool can teach, and the existing fools are no good at it. Napoleon might lose the battle of Waterloo, but he reformed the French curriculum. (Jenkins, 2010)*

The curriculum battleground

In recent times, the school curriculum has become something of a political battleground across a number of countries. Simon Jenkins, quoted above, was writing about the situation in England, and the very particular perspectives of the then secretary of state for education, Michael Gove, but his observations reflect an all too recognisable scenario in developed education systems. This paper will look at the complex and fraught relationships between the school curriculum and government in England, Wales and Australia, before looking at the Republic of Ireland. To map these relationships, three different perspectives on curriculum (from the myriad available in curriculum scholarship) will be used – the technical, the process and the practice.

Originally, curriculum was seen as the product of a technical planning process. Ralph Tyler, writing in 1949, suggested that the construction of a curriculum was simply a matter of choosing and organising the subject matter that comprises any school or college programme of study. This technical view of curriculum continues to have influence and is particularly appealing to policy makers and to the comment lines of talk radio when debate on a bewildering array of problems inevitably arrives at the seemingly obvious and simple solution to 'put it on the curriculum.'

This view is underpinned by a belief that policies are 'implemented' and turn out as intended, and that curriculum 'problems' arise because teachers and other social actors

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

don't follow the instructions they have been given. Such a view ignores the fact that intentions are one of the most inconsistent predictors of the results of policies. The same is true of curriculum. Curriculum aims are rarely a good guide to curriculum experiences. While some technical work is required in the making of curriculum, above all, curriculum is a social construct, and that task of social construction applies to both the written curriculum (provided by governments or other agencies) and the enacted curriculum (experienced by students in classrooms or other educational settings).

This social and constructed dimension of curriculum has been the subject of much scholarly reflection and debate. On one side we have those who believe that the purpose of curriculum and of schooling is knowledge. This is the specialist role of the school, and the university. Historically, such scholars connect with the origins of curriculum in Christianity and Islam as sacred knowledge, which evolved into the secular disciplines of the university system and on to shape school subjects. On the other side are the followers of Rousseau and Dewey, who believe that the purpose of the curriculum is to support learning and the role of the teacher to facilitate that learning through engagement with knowledge and specialist disciplines but also with engagement with everyday experience. Among their number are the optimistic digital evangelists, who believe that, suitably supported, learners can learn what and when they like. They stand accused by their opposite numbers of 'learnification' and downgrading knowledge. In turn, our proponents of knowledge stand accused of elitism in the face of an explosion of knowledge and increased accessibility to knowledge.

However, as Goodson (1998, 1999) has noted, these perennial debates in curriculum scholarship have often resulted in complex analyses that can be far removed from classroom practice: one of the perennial problems of studying curriculum is that it is a multifaceted concept constructed, negotiated and re-negotiated at a variety of levels and in a variety of arenas. This elusiveness has no doubt contributed to the rise to theoretical and overarching perspectives – psychological, philosophical, sociological – as well as more technical or scientific paradigms. But these perspectives and paradigms have been criticised recently because they do violence to the practical essentials of curriculum as conceived of and realised (Goodson, 1989, p1).

Elliott (1998) also emphasises the need to move beyond a technical view, but also asserts the importance of the student experience of curriculum noting that: "...Mere changes in syllabus content do not require fundamental pedagogical change but curriculum change based on a fundamental re-appraisal of the nature of school knowledge does, since it implies a new way of representing knowledge to the student" (p22).

For Elliott, curriculum is 'the language of education'. Drawing on Bruner he sees the teacher as a 'human event' not a 'transmission device'.

Similarly, Maxine Greene (1971) developed a dual notion of curriculum that included classroom practice and classroom practitioners. However, she went further. She described the dominant view of curriculum as socially presented knowledge to be mastered by the learner but proposed a view of curriculum as "a possibility for the learner as an existing person mainly concerned with making sense of his own life world" (1971, p. 3). Thus three different perspectives emerge. The first, the technical view proposed by Tyler and his followers, sees curriculum as product – the course or programme of study to be published.

In Goodson's analysis, and that of Elliott, curriculum is a complex process, socially constructed and inclusive of the enacted curriculum in classrooms. Recognising the product and process dimensions, Greene goes further and proposes a view of curriculum as practice.

The 'line of command' in curriculum battles

In a lecture delivered in Edinburgh in May 2014, Robin Alexander, who led the *Cambridge Review of Primary Education in England*, traced the fraught relationship between the school curriculum and central government in England. He delivered the lecture at the height of the controversy about what he called the 'neo-Victorian' curriculum reforms introduced in England in September 2014. He recalls the declaration of George Tomlinson, the minister for education in Clement Atlee's government, that "Minister knows nowt about curriculum". He considers his own experience as teacher in the 1960s working from a handbook with the cautious title *Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers and Others Concerned with the Work of Primary Schools*. Commenting on the current scenario in England he notes that Minister Gove "removed the remaining checks and balances on absolute ministerial power, ensuring that nothing obstructed the line of command between his office and the schools" (2014, p 2). The agency which previously had the responsibility for the curriculum, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), was abolished in 2012.

Much has been written since the departure of Michael Gove from his post in education about his particular perspective on the school curriculum and how it should be determined and about his government's policy of a 'line of command' for some schools and a 'freedom' for academies and other free schools from the requirements of the new curriculum, even if these schools are reluctant to embrace them (see http://news.tes.co.uk/b/news/2014/03/10/academies-shun-freedoms-available-to-them-survey-shows.aspx). This line of command model is obviously associated with a technical view of curriculum and of the curriculum development process. The latter is relatively straightforward. Curriculum is 'produced' and then 'implemented' in classrooms by teachers.

The story of England's curriculum wars is mirrored elsewhere. In Wales for example, in March 2014, the Welsh assembly minister Hew Lewis appointed the former chief inspector in Scotland to lead a review of its national curriculum – early years, primary and post primary. The review was ordered by the minister after the poor PISA performance of Welsh students in December 2013 which he claimed was the result of decades of "denial, drift and dither" (www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/pisa-results-alarming-declines-core-6364784). Of note, in 2006 the equivalent of the QCA in Wales, Awdurdod Cymwysterau, Cwricwlwm ac Asesu Cymru (ACCAC), had been abolished and its functions merged with the Department for Education and Children.

Further afield, similar 'lines of command' are being established between Government and the school curriculum. In Australia, the emerging national curriculum, developed by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Agency (ACARA) over six years and supported by state and national consultation, was heavily criticised by the newly elected liberal government in 2013. Earlier this year, the Australian minister for education, Christopher Pyne, appointed two individuals with strong links to the new government to review

the curriculum following controversies about the particular focus on Australia in Asia, on sustainability and on indigenous history across the new curriculum. In announcing the appointments, the minister made the following observation; "I'm getting people to objectively review the National Curriculum to ensure that it is robust, and to ensure that it puts students' results first, that the priority is on outcomes and everyone in education... well everyone has been to school... everyone is an expert on education in one way or another... almost 40% of many of the populations in capital cities have been to school, have been to universities, and they're also experts on university education".

In responding to the announcement of the review, the chair of ACARA, Professor Barry McGaw, wrote to the review team, defending the vigorous processes adopted by ACARA in work to date and the consultation and analysis undertaken. He opened the letter thus: "The school curriculum expresses a nation's aspirations for its next generations. The curriculum must strike a balance between developing young people's understanding of their national history and culture and preparing them for a future that is increasingly global and largely unpredictable".

"What constitutes essential school learning will always be contested because behind it is a debate about what knowledge is of most worth. Curriculum stirs the passions – and that is a good thing. Curriculum is never completed. It is never perfect and should always be a work in progress. As responsible citizens, we are obliged to provide our future generations with the best possible learning opportunities and outcomes." (McGaw, 2014).

McGaw's letter is of note for its efforts to reclaim curriculum making as a public rather than party political project. Of note, he is clear that curriculum making is a political process, but a process and responsibility that reaches well beyond government ministers. In England, Wales and Australia, current reviews of curriculum are very much party political projects. Independent or autonomous organisations or agencies with responsibility for curriculum (such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] in Ireland) have been abolished or sidelined in the process.

An Irish battleground? The role of the NCCA

Compared with recent and current events in England, Wales and Australia, the curriculum in Ireland appears more resistant to direct intervention by politicians. Although, as evidenced in ongoing debates about the status of history in post-primary education, compulsory Irish in senior cycle, and mathematics at all phases of education, curriculum inspires plenty of strong opinions and comment. The absence of direct intervention is due in no small degree to the continued existence of the NCCA which has the brief to advise the minister for education and skills on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education and for primary and post-primary schools (Government of Ireland, 1998, p.38). The council is representative in composition – teacher unions, management bodies, parents' organisations, industry and business interests and was established on a statutory basis in July 2001 following earlier establishment as the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) in 1984 and the NCCA in 1987.

Until the CEB, curriculum development had been a highly centralised and "sometimes mysterious process" (Granville, 2004) based in the Department of Education. The representative

structure of the NCCA continues to be unique, certainly among English speaking education systems. Thus, for example, the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA) discussed earlier, shares much of the same remit of the NCCA, but is not representative in composition. As Granville notes, this structure is reflective of the model of social partnership in use in Ireland for social and economic planning and development in the last decades of the 20th century. He does not see it as completely apolitical, suggesting that all of these competing interests are interested in promoting or protecting their own interests in addition to, or perhaps even through, developing curriculum and assessment (ibid). Gleeson suggests that teacher unions and management bodies "effectively control the NCCA and its committees". (2004, p 116). This less positive view of partnership is not confined to Ireland. Gewirtz and Ozga (1990) are similarly sceptical about the partnership rhetoric. They are critical of a nostalgic, naïve view of partnership that sees it as a pluralist idyll they are keen to shatter in declaring that "an essential element of pluralism is that power is distributed, and that politics is a process of bargaining between interest groups and between groups and government" (1990, p.38). A strong partnership rhetoric, they suggest, can mask a "policy elite" and a "closed policy community". (ibid.p.47).

Sugrue (2004) takes a similar critical perspective but, in the case of the development of the 1999 curriculum, suggests that the involvement and engagement of INTO representatives and nominees in the processes and structures allowed for strong teacher ownership of that curriculum and a strong professional buy-in as a consequence. He quotes the comment of the then INTO general secretary Joe O'Toole who contrasts the 1971 curriculum with the 'new' 1999 curriculum, which, suggested O'Toole, had been developed by NCCA committees "driven, guided and influenced by working teachers". (1999, quoted in Sugrue, 2004, p 182).

Despite the shortcomings of the partnership and representative structure, the existence of the NCCA ensures that the political 'line of command' is at worse more dispersed, and at best entirely displaced by a deliberative process that represents a more public engagement with curriculum development and a view of curriculum as process.

The coming of curriculum as practice

Fast forward to 2014, and to the current scenario in the NCCA where the structures remain as they were when the NCCA was established, with the additional practice of co-opting expertise where needed (NCCA, 2012). Two recent developments in how the NCCA works are of significance. The first arises from the observation in the NCCA's strategic plan for 2012-2015 that other voices and other ways of working challenge how the council is composed and how it works: "The presence of urgent and diverse voices in the education debate challenges the commitment of the NCCA to consult as widely as possible and its capacity to offer advice that represents a consensus view. In addition, the composition of the council is likely to come under increasing scrutiny from two sources. First, voices not represented on the council are increasingly active in pursuing membership, and second, the ability of a group that works on a consensus basis to continue to deliver effective and meaningful change will be carefully monitored by advocates of different approaches." (NCCA, 2012, p 7).

The intractable tension between attempts to reach consensus, and to consult and engage as widely as possible is acknowledged and identified as a potential weakness in the face of challenges from those 'advocates of different approaches' which, although not specified, seem likely to include more direct party political command.

The second significant recent development in the NCCA has been the practice of working directly with networks of teachers, schools, early years' practitioners and early years' settings as part of the curriculum process. The same strategic plan quoted above includes a specific commitment "to engage with learners, teachers, practitioners, parents and others to support innovation in schools and other educational settings" (ibid. p9). Two current examples include the Aistear Tutor Network, made up of teachers in the infant years from across the country using *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* with children, and the junior cycle school network of 48 schools breaking new ground in planning for and organising the first three years of post-primary schools.

This direct engagement, alongside the deliberative engagement with representatives and nominees, is an attempt to include curriculum as practice in the process of developing the national curriculum that represents, as McGaw says, a nation's aspirations for its children, but also sets the context for the professional work of teachers. Those teachers and others who participate in NCCA networks are seen as agents of curriculum development; their practice is valued, not as a site of curriculum 'implementation' but as a context for innovation. In an important paper published in 2009, *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools*, the NCCA set out the rationale for this new approach to its work: "In recent years, direct engagement with schools has enabled the NCCA to access the perspectives of teachers and schools on many dimensions of curriculum and assessment change. These are critical inputs and insights not only in the context of curriculum development but also in how to generate an effective model for leading and supporting change. The initiatives have valued teacher inquiry and insights by recognising teachers as generators of real knowledge about what works in teaching and learning and, as such, have brought teachers and their schools into the field of policy development and change in the area of curriculum and assessment. Appreciating the centrality of teachers to leading and supporting change involves continued work on initiatives directly with schools and placing a particular emphasis within that work on researching and consulting on leading and supporting change." (NCCA, 2009, p. 17). This rationale is clearly informed by the practice perspective on curriculum with its associated emphasis on teacher agency in any change and development process.

This approach has given rise to the NCCA's much debated online portal for all curriculum material – www.curriculumonline.ie. Ironically, the site initially appears to position itself within the technical paradigm by announcing that it is a new way of 'presenting' curriculum. However, closer examination shows the radical nature of the initiative. In curriculumonline, teacher agency is foregrounded. The clipboard function allows teachers to customise 'their' curriculum for classroom use. In the new junior cycle English specification, the first of the new junior cycle subjects introduced in 2014, examples of student work from the field of practice are included, together with the commentary and analysis of teachers. Thus the professional voice is given a place in the 'national curriculum'.

Debates around this new portal are continuing. Issues raised include the absence of a curriculum 'book' and the requirement for teachers to search and choose rather than just 'read'. 'Implementation' is not without supporters nor without appeal. However, initial responses to the clipboard function are positive, with primary teachers, in particular, already used to the online planning tool making ready use of its functions. Technical glitches remain to be ironed out but should not deflect from the significant principle being promoted of foregrounding professional curriculum practice, against a global trend of sidelining, even undermining it.

And they lived happily…?

In engaging with public lay audiences on curriculum issues I often use the description that curriculum is the set of stories that one generation chooses to tell the next. This image embraces the technical (the anthology of stories), the process (the choice, revision and choosing again) and the practice (storytelling) perspectives. That description will always generate a response. Most audiences will participate enthusiastically in a debate about which stories are more important and why, about who should choose and on what basis. When considered this way, as McGaw suggests, curriculum does indeed stir the passion. It explains, at least to some degree, why politicians cannot resist the temptation to re-write, re-form or re-build it.

Those stories arise from a form of moral contract between society, the state and education professionals and institutions with regard to the educational experiences of children and young people at particular stages of their lives. In recent years, the inclusion of the children and young people themselves as agents in that contract has added further complexity to the task of articulating that set of stories.

Yet much of our contemporary curriculum talk is presented in problematised terms. The curriculum is inevitably overcrowded, often irrelevant, not meeting the needs of low achievers/high achievers or non-achievers. It can be dismissed as old fashioned while at the same time subject to faddish change, and even as lacking in machismo, thus alienating and lowering the chances of educational success of young boys. In fact, increasingly, the curriculum is seen as almost something to be overcome in the life of the school rather than being its raison d'être! Thus teachers at all levels of the education system talk about their frustration at having to compromise on pedagogical or technological innovation in order to 'cover' the curriculum. This dystopian view is in marked contrast to the utopian promise of the curriculum to come – the nirvana of the 21st century curriculum, which always seems tantalisingly out of reach. This motivating curriculum, with its promise of a delicate balance of skills and knowledge, a focus on mastery mindsets, which promotes self-directed and autonomous learning in equal measure and supports child and teacher well-being, is the educational equivalent of *The Great Oz*. It is illusion, albeit a powerful and compelling one that drives us forward, but sometimes, blinds us to the achievements of the journey. The teacher voices in curriculumonline tell the story of the journey. It's a story that would terrify Napoleon, but one that deserves to be heard.

References

Alexander, R. (2014). *Evidence, Policy and the Reform of Primary Education: A cautionary tale*. The 2014 Godfrey Thomson Trust Lecture University of Edinburgh. Retrieved from: www.robinalexander.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Alexander-Edinburgh-140513.pdf

Elliott, J. (1998). *The Curriculum Experiment. Meeting the Challenge of Social Change*. Birmingham: Open University Press.

Gewirtz, S., and Ozga, J. (1990). Partnership, pluralism and education policy: a reassessment. *Journal of Education Policy*, 5, 1, 37-48.

Gleeson, J. (2004). Cultural politics and Irish post-primary curriculum. In Sugrue, C. (Ed.), *Curriculum and Ideology: Irish Experiences International Perpsectives* (pp 101-140). Dublin: The Liffey Press.

Goodson, I. (1989). Studying Curriculum. Towards a Social Constructivist Perspective. Occasional Paper No 44. *Curriculum Praxis*. Department of Secondary Education. University of Alberta. Retrieved from: www2.education.ualberta.ca/educ/sec/docs/Occasional Paper No. 44 - Goodson.pdf

Goodson, I. (1998). *The Making of Curriculum, Collected Essays*. London and Bristol: The Falmer Press.

Government of Ireland (1998). *Education Act*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Granville, G. (2004). Politics and Partnership in Curriculum Planning in Ireland. In Sugrue, C. (Ed.), *Curriculum and Ideology: Irish Experiences International Perpsectives* (pp 67-99). Dublin: The Liffey Press.

Greene, M. (1971). Curriculum and Consciousness. *Teachers College Record*, 73 (2), 253-270.

Jenkins, S. (2010, November 25). Napoleon Gove can dictate its terms but the school curriculum is bogus. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from www.theguardian.com

Luke, A. (2010). Will the Australian Curriculum up the intellectual ante in primary classrooms? *Professional Voice*, 8 (1), 41-47.

Mourshed, M., Chijioke, C., and Barber, M. (2010) How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better. Mc Kinsey.com. Retrieved from: http://mckinseyonsociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/How-the-Worlds-Most-Improved-School-Systems-Keep-Getting-Better_Download-version_Final.pdf

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009). *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools: Discussion Paper*. Dublin: NCCA. Retrieved from: www.ncca.ie/en/Publications/Consultative_Documents/Leading_and_Supporting_Change_in_Schools_A_Discussion_Paper.pdf

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2012). *Supporting the Strategic Plan 2012-2015: Structures and process*. Dublin: NCCA. Retrieved from: www.ncca.ie/en/About_Us/Boards-and-Development-Groups/Structures-and-Processes-.pdf

Sugrue, C. (Ed.) (2004). *Curriculum and Ideology. Irish Experiences International Perpsectives*. Dublin: The Liffey Press.

Tyler, R. (1949). *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (2013 Edition). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The challenge of supporting literacy in a digital age: perspectives of Irish primary school teachers

DUNCAN MCCARTHY AND BRIAN MURPHY

Abstract

Despite research promoting the benefits of explicitly supporting children in developing the key skills and strategies associated with online reading in order to develop as successful readers in a digital age, a significant gap between research and classroom practice exists. This paper explores the provision of support for digital literacy by teachers in mainstream Irish primary schools. The main focus was on understandings of literacy in a digital age and how teachers are currently supporting digital literacy. This qualitative small-scale study employed focus groups as a survey method to investigate teachers' perspectives and experiences. The findings highlight a continued overemphasis on the development of traditional print literacy skills, uncertainty over the place for digital literacy support, a growing home/school technology gap and key barriers to effective accommodation of technological advancements in classrooms. It is envisioned that the findings reported may have some contribution to make to the debate on effective support for literacy in a digital age.

Introduction and context

Society globally has undergone substantial change in recent years, typified by technological developments. The internet and other technologies have become very prominent in everyday life and have come to epitomise 21st century living. In this context, according to Leu et al. (2008), children themselves are extremely active online. However, despite Prensky (2001) going so far as to refer to children as 'digital natives', it would appear that they do not have adequately developed digital literacy skills (Dwyer, 2012). Therefore, to ensure that children are equipped with the skills essential for modern life, research suggests that schools should become learning environments where technology is actively embraced (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). Importantly, despite research indicating that children require explicit teaching in key digital literacy skills and strategies, internationally a significant gap exists between research and classroom practice and educators seem unsure how best to integrate technology into the literacy learning environment (Marsh, 2009).

This paper examines digital literacy support from an Irish perspective. It gives a voice to the teachers who are part of the primary school literacy learning environment and therefore best placed to provide insights into current thinking, beliefs and practice at that level. Significantly, it attempts to understand digital literacy development in Irish schools by

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

situating it in the broader context of literacy development and examining if, where, and how it is reflected in the understandings of teachers.

New understandings of literacy

Recently, there has been a shift in the understanding of literacy because of the feeling that traditional literacy was failing children in this digital age due to changes in their literacy practices (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). In the new literacies framework, the definition of literacy has developed to accommodate many different literacies: digital literacy, media literacy, and computer literacy, as distinct from the traditional one dimensional understanding (Kennedy et. al, 2012; Merchant, 2009). Furthermore, literacy in this environment changes to a dynamic term that is constantly evolving and becoming literate can be considered a lifelong process (Perkins et al., 2011). It is thought provoking to suggest that educators are unsure what literacy practices the children currently beginning primary school will be engaging in when they leave, such is the speed with which technology is advancing (Dwyer, 2012; Leu et al., 2005). Research has called for a reappraisal of literacy development in schools and a movement from a traditional bottom up skills based model of literacy development to one where new literacies are appreciated and developed (Merchant, 2009). The claim is that conventional literacy learning, where lessons have focused predominantly on print media, relying on the use of books, magazines, newspapers and journals, is inadequate due to the emergence of alternative literacy landscapes (Leu, 2000b). Moreover, changes have been further fuelled by socio-cultural perspectives which consider the social aspects of literacy and embed literacy in culture and meaning (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). Attempts have been made to change the pedagogical approaches to the teaching of literacy from top-down teacher led lessons to lessons with a clear emphasis on cultural identity, learning by doing and collaboration to enhance deep learning (Street and Efstein, 2007; Gee, 2004). Hence, in such a classroom environment, literacy support begins with an acknowledgement of the literacy needs and interests of the child to ensure a meaningful learning environment.

Leu et al. (2008) propose that the process of reading online is now fundamental to participation in modern society and for the purpose of this research, digital literacy will be understood as the ability to immerse oneself in this process (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005). Notably, in the Irish context, Dwyer (2010) suggests that while print based reading and online reading share similar foundational skills, different skills, strategies and dispositions are required to successfully navigate the multimodal nature of online 'text'. Moreover, evidence suggests that effective traditional print readers are not always effective readers online (Leu et al., 2008) and that there are a number of specific skills one needs to negotiate a digital text including critically evaluating, searching and understanding multimodality (Dwyer, 2012; Coiro, 2009; Walsh, 2007; Leu et al., 2005).

Alternative literacy texts and the online reading strategies

The internet and other digital technologies are central to life in an information age, and are used by adults and children alike to search for information, develop understanding, and

communicate (Mc Gowan, 2005). With the onset of the internet, children are now sending and receiving emails, chatting with friends on social media forums, engaging in collaborative projects and searching for information online. As a result of the central role the internet plays in the daily lives of children, to nurture literacy effectively, the internet should be part of the very fabric of any understanding of what literacy is and integrated into the learning environment (Marsh, 2011; Kinzer, 2005; Mc Gowan, 2005). The key strategies associated with effective online reading are addressed in the sections which follow.

Critical literacy

It should be noted that children have always been required to be critical of the texts with which they have engaged (Mulcahy, 2010). However, the digital age has resulted in an even greater need for critical literacy as a fundamental literacy skill (Leu et al., 2005; Livingstone, 2004; Mc Kenna et. al, 1999). The very significant shift in control over the authenticity and hierarchical ownership of texts has been a key change. Furthermore, the quantity of nformation has increased exponentially because of a mass information explosion online. However, Mills (2010) highlights that those children who critically evaluate online information and have been taught how to are in the minority. On the basis of findings from their study, Coiro and Dobler (2007) were surprised by the lack of attention that even adolescents appeared to pay to the legitimacy of information on the websites they accessed.

In accordance with Luke and Freebody's (1990) model, through effective digital literacy pedagogy, children should be afforded the opportunities to develop critical thinking skills, moving from a passive to a critical consumption role (Handsfield et al., 2009). Teachers need to support children in the development of their understanding of bias, relevance and the importance of keeping information up to date (Livingstone, 2004). In this learning environment, children develop a better understanding of the nature of information; fit for purpose, verifiable, trustworthy and the techniques the author used to create it (Dobson and Willinsky, 2009; Coiro, 2007).

Searching

Investigations into child digital literacy practices suggest that children now access information most frequently on the internet (Moran et al., 2008). Hence, searching online has become a crucial skill when negotiating the internet and is one of the key online reading strategies (Dobson and Willinsky, 2009). However, Coiro and Dobler (2007) posit that children struggle with the independency of the navigation through different websites to find reliable information. They are unaware which search engines to use, how to generate search terms and which websites are most likely to provide pertinent information. To substantiate this point, Coiro (2009) claims that children are frequently guilty of immediately accessing the first suggestion provided by search engines in their quest for knowledge.

Therefore, teachers need to support children in familiarising themselves with the different search engines and the potential advantages and disadvantages of each (Leu et al., 2008). Furthermore, children need to be made aware of keywords during searching and how to choose the best search option by reading through the results (Dwyer, 2012). In order to fully comprehend how children engage with the fluid, open-ended and interactive online texts,

further research is required so that literacy instruction can be reviewed and move in line with 21st century learning.

Multimodality

New ways of 'reading' in digital spaces are challenging our understandings of what it means to be literate. Literacy has moved beyond the decoding of words (Sangiuliano, 2005), as multimodal online texts include words, pictures, audio and video clips in interactive and diverse digital spaces (Walsh, 2006; Mc Kenna et. al, 1999). Hence, these texts provide more than one way of making meaning, combining the visual, the gestural and the tactile (Pahl and Rowsell, 2006).

A common misconception in the traditional approach to reading development has maintained that elements such as pictures are inferior, and simply one of the steps towards meaningful literacy through words (Larson and Marsh, 2006; Millard and Marsh, 2001). However, it would appear that print can either be fundamental or peripheral in digital literacy. While being able to read print is still crucial in online spaces, it is no longer necessarily the most dominant literacy skill (Mills, 2010).

Online texts are non-linear and more open ended and unbounded by nature (Dobson and Willinsky, 2009), defying our common understanding of the reading process. Moreover, websites are often multi-layered, requiring deeper investigation (Jewitt, 2005). Hence, reading in this new literacy landscape is not simply a process of movement from the first word to the last in a stable and linear pattern (Pahl and Rowsell, 2006). McKenna et. al (1999) suggest that when children read a multimodal text they are engaged in a challenging textual landscape that is interactive, and contains integrated multimedia content and a limitless range of choices. Hence, the onus is on them to independently construct a pathway towards a goal.

New literacy studies research has called for reading in digital spaces to be developed in learning environments, as people of all ages are being challenged to adapt to new technologies (Dwyer, 2012; Jewitt, 2005; Mc Kenna et. al, 1999). Mills (2010) demands support for children so they can develop an understanding of how to choose which elements of the text they should engage with. Moreover, children need guidance on how to take cues from webpages on ways to navigate successfully (Walsh, 2006). Finally, Walsh (2008) and Pahl and Rowsell (2005) believe that to meaningfully engage with multimodal texts, children need to understand them as constructed artefacts. Hence, it is important that children are given the opportunities to engage with developing multimodal texts to nurture their understanding of the importance of each mode.

Making classroom literacy meaningful in a digital age

As the current Irish *Primary School Curriculum* (PSC) (Government of Ireland (GOI), 1999) claims that all learning should begin with the child; his/her interests, needs and experiences, it is unsurprising that in this digital age, there should be a clear call for technological integration in schools (Merchant, 2009; Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). However, research suggests that internationally and in Ireland there is an increasing gap between children's

literacy practices in and out of school (Larson and Marsh, 2006; Gee, 2004). Moreover, Dwyer (2012) highlights that children's literacy interests and digital literacy practices continue to be largely ignored or side lined in the classroom. As a result, an identified tension appears to have developed between the home and the school, where teachers often utilise traditional print texts and resources in which the children may have little interest. Moreover, worryingly, Burnett and Merchant (2012) claim that this failure to acknowledge effectively the different literacy environments of home and school may be causing frustration and feelings of failure among some children.

Much of this tension has resulted in a reality where educators are currently at a point where they are unsure how to cope effectively with developing new literacies (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). It appears that an adequate blend of print and digital literacy is essential although the common classroom reality is that traditional literacy pedagogical practices continue to dominate (National College of Ireland, 2009). Consequently, the question remains whether traditional literacy development should be improved or completely transformed by technology (Merchant, 2009), a debate which is represented in the discourse around the 'enrichment' and 'transformation' models.

The enrichment and transformation models dichotomy

The enrichment perspective on digital literacy proposes to support or replace traditional printed texts with electronic or digital equivalents, paying little attention to developing pedagogy or the evolving nature of literacy (Burnett et al., 2006; Reinking et. al, 2000). It views technological advances as simply increases in the number of ways of supporting traditional literacy. This model of treating technology as a tool or resource to support traditional print literacy objectives is proposed in the English language section of the current Irish Primary School Curriculum (GOI, 1999). Within this type of learning environment, the potential for technology use is understood in terms of traditional literacy and is simply integrated into conventional lessons (Reinking et. al, 2000). Teachers, as a result, tend to introduce new technology as a tool to reproduce traditional literacy lessons through, for example, using interactive whiteboards (IWBs) as a direct replacement for blackboards and laptops for textbooks.

However, Tan and Guo (2010) posit that the ICT explosion calls for new and more innovative understandings of literacy development beyond mere enrichment. Moreover, Reinking et. al (2000) highlight the dangers of trying to move technology seamlessly into the traditional literacy curriculum. They go so far as to propose that new technologies necessitate a reassessment of current understandings of literacy. In this model, new technologies and technological practices lead to reconceptualised understandings of literacy and ultimately lead to new definitions, objectives, classroom environments and pedagogies.

Teachers should be aware of the types of potential changes to the learning environment, which technology is capable of creating. While the enrichment model aims to manipulate technology to meet the needs of traditional teacher led print literacy lessons, the transformation model supports technological advancements in developing literacy lessons that radically engage learners in real online digital literacy practices, in line with their daily out

of school literacy practices. In a transformative model classroom, students are given the opportunity to develop as active and independent digital learners (Marsh, 2007) and more attention is paid to their digital expertise (Alvermann, 2008). In such a classroom environment, learning must be meaningful (Reinking et. al, 2000), the voice of the student is paramount (Perkins et al., 2011) and there should be a place for both teacher and student led lessons utilising technology (Leu, 2000a).

Barriers to effective digital literacy support

Digital literacy has become a preoccupation of many educational policy makers as they attempt to nurture a population capable of functioning effectively in the 21st century (Livingstone, 2004). In 2009, the International Reading Association (IRA) called for education systems where all children would be supported in their endeavours to become digitally literate (IRA, 2009). They demanded equity in the standard of teachers, access, assessment, internet safety, curriculum opportunities and critical literacy development. However, the reality appears to be quite different with research suggesting that this is far from being the case. Warschauer (2008) identifies this situation and suggests that the current international situation regarding digital literacy is dominated by inadequate policy development and lack of any substantial changes in literacy development practice.

Only a limited amount of research in Ireland has discussed the importance of digital literacy. In 2004, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) proposed a vision where all children would be ICT literate by the time they left school. Similarly, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2011) acknowledge that children in schools at all levels should be capable of reading, writing and communicating using both print and digital media. However, both the NCCA and the DES have failed to adequately address the issue of online reading. The reality in schools is that children are not being exposed to a sufficient amount of electronic reading. This could be gleaned from Shiel (2011), who reports that between 2004 and 2009, there was no increase in the level of IT usage by children in Irish schools.

Teachers with adequate levels of knowledge are vital in nurturing digital literacy in the classroom. However, it would appear that the lack of impact of digital literacy practice could be traced to the fact that teachers appear to suffer from a lack of awareness and confidence in the promotion of digital literacy (Larson and Marsh, 2006). As a result, teachers are finding it difficult to adapt and therefore continue to attempt to engage children, almost exclusively in many cases, in print literacy practices (Graham, 2008).

Continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers has a direct impact on the literacy learning of children (DES, 2011; Garbe, Holle and Weinhold, 2009). However internationally, explicit professional support for teachers with respect to literacy development generally remains limited (Leu, 2000b). Similarly, in Ireland, policy makers and researchers concur that CPD to support teachers has traditionally been and remains inadequate (The Teaching Council, 2011; Sugrue, 2002). Within this context, even less attention has been paid in Ireland to CPD specific to literacy development. Consequently, if teachers are not being supported to develop their understandings and pedagogies with respect to digital literacy,

it is likely that this will impinge negatively on the digital literacy learning experiences and practices of children in their classrooms. In this light, Concannon-Gibney and Murphy (2012) propose a radical overhaul of CPD with respect to literacy, suggesting a progressive model where needs-based individualised school support with respect to literacy development in the broadest sense (including digital literacy), would be provided by literacy experts. Similar positions also emerge from other Irish research in the digital literacy area (see for example Dwyer 2010 and 2012).

Method

The data in this paper draw on findings from a small scale qualitative interpretive research study undertaken using focus group discussions as a method of collecting data. The goal of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives, experiences and classroom practices of a group of Irish teachers in the current digital age and it was therefore decided that a qualitative approach would provide the deepest and richest data. Furthermore, focus groups were selected because they offer the researcher a chance to become familiar with the real experiences of the interviewees (Krueger, 1994).

The focus group convenience sample consisted of 17 primary classroom teachers from one geographical area (the Cork area in the south of Ireland). Barbour (2007) claims that an adequate focus group discussion can be undertaken with three to four participants. In total, four focus groups were undertaken. In terms of the social classification of the participants' schools, all four were of mixed social class. Reflecting the gender pattern of representation across the primary school sector, the majority of participants were female (14) varying in age (up to age 54) and classroom experience (up to 35 years). All of the teachers involved in the study had some familiarity with using technology in their classrooms.

Each focus group lasted approximately 40 minutes and was guided by a list of key questions. The process was modelled on Stewart et al.'s (2007) approach where there is a clear emphasis on creating a comfortable environment so participants don't feel threatened and are willing to engage with the discussion. As a result, some ground rules were initially established including an expectation that everyone would display openness and show each participant respect. The raw data from the recorded focus group interviews was transcribed, including probes, slang and pauses (Berg, 2009).

In the next stage of the process, a content analysis approach to examining the focus group transcripts was adopted (Berg, 2009). Cohen et al. (2011) recommend that data reduction and transformation should occur to ensure that relevant themes and patterns can be drawn out before analysis. As a result, the data was summarised after the transcription, acknowledging key quotations and terms. The next step in the process was coding, where content of the transcripts was examined to identify common trends within and between focus groups (Ryan, 2006). This flexible process of determining the themes to be included in the research was both inductive and deductive, including predetermined themes but also being flexible enough to integrate themes established by the participants (Barbour, 2007). Some of the key themes to emerge included literacy development in the 21st century, movement towards digital literacy support, making literacy meaningful in a digital age and

barriers to effective digital literacy instruction. Having extracted the themes, the analysis shifted from description to interpretation (Ryan, 2006).

Findings and discussion

Literacy teaching in the 21st century

In the new literacies model, the crucial role for technology and the internet in literacy development is acknowledged as literacy evolves to support new digital literacy practices. Nevertheless, despite an acknowledgment of the changes in the understandings of literacy, educators are currently at a point where they are unsure how to cope effectively (Dwyer, 2012; Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). Rather unsurprisingly, it was obvious from the focus groups that the vast majority of participating teachers in this study still shared the traditional understanding of literacy as synonymous with reading and writing printed words on paper and skills such as phonics and fluency (Focus group discussion (FG)2, participating teacher (P)5; FG3, P12; FG4, P14). As participant 11, a teacher with eight years' experience, noted: "To me really, literacy would be reading the old fashioned way". (FG3, page of the transcript (p.1). There did not appear to be any place for technology in the general understanding of literacy among the surveyed teachers. This is significant as there are very strong indications in current research that the continued overemphasis on this type of decontextualised literacy support may be leading to increased disinterest in school literacy activities among some children (Hamston, 2006).

The key role of technology in society has forced the hand of educators, and policy makers around the world are attempting to harness the potential of technology and the internet in improving literacy education (Warschauer and Matuchniak, 2010). As a result, there is constant pressure on teachers, demanding that computers and other technologies be integrated into the learning environment. However, despite this, the level of technological integration in Irish classrooms appears to remain limited, and participating teachers consistently commented on the lack of resources. Participant two, a teacher in a large urban primary school, stated: "I think that really we need the resources to incorporate that into schools. You know one computer in a room is not going to do it, not going to cut it." (FG1, p.7). This is considerably out of line with the advocated, one laptop with wireless access per child, proposed by Leu et al. (2008).

Notably, the introduction of the interactive whiteboard seems to be the only consistent technological advancement mentioned extensively in this study, which has caused the greatest recent change in the literacy learning environment (FG1, P1; FG 2, P8). Traditionally, textbooks would have been the foundation upon which literacy lessons in Ireland were built. However, technological advancements have now made the IWB an invaluable resource. Participant two went so far as to state that the IWB had become the primary resource for her when supporting literacy development "I suppose the interactive whiteboard would be the biggest part of my literacy teaching". (FG1, p.4).

Turel and Johnson (2012) and Shenton and Pagett (2007) claim that although the IWBs can be seen as a move towards technological integration, teachers often use them to support and enrich traditional teacher-led print literacy lessons. Similarly, it emerged during discussions

that the main use for the IWB during literacy lessons appeared to be as a technological replacement for the traditional whiteboard. Teachers, overall, appeared satisfied with the ease with which the IWB allowed them to use *Powerpoint* to teach lessons, examine textbooks online with children, and improve phonics (FG1, P3; FG3, P13; FG4, P15). This is in line with the previous findings of Mulcahy (2010) in respect of the traditional enrichment literacy learning environment of Irish classrooms.

Digital literacy practices have the potential to disrupt current literacy practices by revolutionising teaching and learning in a transformative model (Walsh, 2008: Somekh, 2007). They propose less of an emphasis on transmitting knowledge and more support for children actively engaging in learning in digital spaces, with the teacher scaffolding support (Graham, 2008). However, somewhat surprisingly, only one of the 17 teachers surveyed, demonstrated an awareness of the potential change in the learning environment where ICT integration and internet usage could be introduced to alter the learning context as advocated by current research (Merchant, 2009; Reinking et. al, 2000). Participant 16, who admitted to having a limited understanding of digital literacy, appeared genuinely excited by the possibilities of the internet and other technology. Alone among the 17 teachers, this participant proposed that control and responsibility could be shared with the children in an interactive classroom where the children are given greater technological access and independence: "When I want to find something out that I don't know I go and find it. I check out that it's ok. Maybe they should do more of that and they could be more independent."

The discussion to date has clearly highlighted that the traditional print dominated, skills based, whole class instruction approach to literacy development remains prevalent in Irish classrooms. Secondly, despite a push for ICT integration into literacy learning lessons, children are still not generally accessing technology and the internet in schools. Moreover, the idea of children actively and independently engaging with technology at this level seems, at present, to be an unrealistic prospect due to a lack of understanding and support structures and willingness and ability on behalf of a majority of teachers to introduce this type of learning environment.

Current digital literacy support in the literacy learning environment

Undeniably, traditional print literacy lessons are still key to literacy development programmes in schools. Nevertheless, to become literate in a digital age, engagement with technology in an appropriate manner is crucial in supporting digital literacy development (Larson and Marsh, 2006). However, digital literacy in Irish classrooms often remains synonymous with the technical skills needed to operate computers (NCCA, 2004). Unsurprisingly, a number of the participating teachers defined digital literacy as developing children's abilities to turn on and off computers and improving word processing skills (FG2, P7; FG4, P15).

Notably, an overwhelming majority of the surveyed teachers seemed to believe that digital literacy development equated to using technology as a tool for teachers to support the teaching of traditional print reading skills. The internet (or electronic texts) did not seem to have been introduced into the classroom as a vital resource in supporting children in developing their online skills. Rather, it appeared to be used as a teaching resource in a

teacher-led, typically instruction based classroom, allowing teachers to access 'more material' (FG2, P9, p.3) and make lessons 'much more eye catching' (FG3, P11, p.4). Certainly, these interpretations of digital literacy among the majority of surveyed teachers would appear to be in stark contrast to those acknowledged in current research (Leu et al., 2005).

Prensky (2001) outlines how he believes that children nowadays are comfortable with technology and the internet, whereas many teachers are struggling to adapt. In agreement, many of the teachers in this study suggested that the children were the digital age. As participant 14 noted: "But with the children the technology is theirs, they have ownership over it. So they're comfortable with it" (FG4, p.13). Hence, it appears that a significant reason why teachers may be failing to support a movement towards effective digital literacy support lies in their overestimation of the capabilities of children. Certainly, the majority of the participants claimed that the children were digitally competent and capable of reading and searching online. In spite of this finding and the claims made by Prensky (2001), children need explicit support in understanding digital spaces as a result of frequently being challenged by the vast amount of information on internet sites. Hence, modelling, guiding and facilitating children's practice of digital literacy remains a key role for all teachers (Mills, 2010; Marsh, 2007).

To summarise these key findings, it appears that the surveyed teachers' understandings of how they should be developing digital literacy are at present insufficient. Teachers in this study narrowly defined digital literacy merely as the introduction of ICT to support traditional literacy learning. Although current research highlights the importance of digital literacy development, current classroom provision seems inadequate in this respect. Teachers' overemphasis on the abilities and confidence of children in negotiating digital spaces may be contributing to this lack of digital literacy support in the classroom.

Making literacy meaningful in a digital age

Appreciating children's identities outside of school and supporting contextualised literacy development appears to create a richer learning environment and the ultimate goal of literacy should be to direct children so that they can lead meaningful lives both in and outside the school environment (Mills, 2010; Hall, 2008). Participating teachers agreed that literacy learning should begin with the child and accommodate their interests and abilities (FG1, P1; FG4, P16). Participant 11 claimed that: "Every lesson has to be meaningful, you know, or it won't sink in I think" (FG3, p.6). Surprisingly, however, the home/school literacy link was traditionally viewed as one-dimensional, from school to home (FG3, P7). Even participant 9, a teacher comfortable with using ICT, highlighted the issue when she noted: "But I think it's more what we use in school, they use at home. Rather than what they use at home being used in school" (FG2, p.5). Significantly, this lack of attention to the children's literacy practices outside of school may call into question the willingness or ability of many teachers to integrate the experiences and interests of children across all curricular areas.

Lambirth (2003) and Merchant (2005) claim that the more recent digital literacy interests of children have been somewhat ignored in classrooms, often as a result of the prevalence of negative attitudes towards children's digital literacy practices among the teaching community. Similarly, the devaluing of some children's home digital literacy practices

emerged as an important finding during this study (FG4, P16; FG2, P7). Participant 12 clearly highlighted this point when he remarked on the low or poor learning value of some of the digital literacy practices of the children in his class: "Nothing educational now. They'd be on Moshi Monsters and online games or one or two of them would be watching *YouTube* or watching cartoons" (FG3, p.6). It would appear that some of the children's online activities are not even recognised as forms of literacy despite research providing evidence to the contrary (Gee and Levine, 2009). As participant one noted: "And I suppose it's not… literacy... I mean *YouTube* has taken over for a lot of them" (FG1, p.6).

The key findings here would seem to indicate that although teachers acknowledge the fundamental role meaningful learning should occupy in literacy lessons, in practice it plays a limited role. While teachers are aware of the digital literacy practices of children at home, little effort has been made to integrate these practices into the literacy classroom. This may contribute to a growing gap between the home and school literacy practices of students.

Key barriers to creating effective digital literacy classrooms

There appears to be an increasing awareness among governments and international bodies of the role of digital literacy in actually supporting child literacy development. Current international educational research suggests that digital literacy development should be an essential component of any effective literacy support (Marsh, 2009; Coiro and Dobler, 2007) with the new online reading skills including the ability to critically evaluate, undertake searches, and navigate multimodal landscapes becoming essential (Dwyer, 2012; Walsh, 2007). Similarly, Irish educational policy expects teachers to play an active role in nurturing digital literacy, particularly evident with the publication of *ICT in the Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 2004) and the recent *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (DES, 2011).

However, many of the surveyed teachers showed signs of a lack of knowledge of what was expected of them regarding digital literacy, with prolonged periods of silence and declarations of uncertainty during focus group discussions when online reading strategies were addressed. It seemed obvious by omissions that many of the participating teachers were not supporting children in the development of digital literacy at all. Participant 11 was unsure where to begin to teach these skills as evidenced by her statement: "Would you have to start with the basics? I suppose you'd start with the search tools and work from there" (FG3, p.11). Likewise, participant six, a teacher in only her second year teaching, exhibited some uncertainty about her role as a teacher in respect of digital literacy when she addressed the issue: "So are we saying that we should explicitly teach this to the children? It seems to be very important…" (FG2, p.8). Significantly, when specifically asked about multimodal texts, although a number offered guesses (FG1, P3; FG3, P10), the majority of the teachers admitted to a lack of awareness (FG4, P17; FG2, P11). Moreover, participant 14, currently teaching first and second class in a rural school declared: "I've never heard that word before" (FG4, P14, p.15).

This policy practice gap would seem to suggest that it remains uncertain whether or not the government sees digital literacy development as a real priority in Irish classrooms, despite references to digital literacy in policy documents (DES, 2011). The findings emerging from

this study would lead one to believe that digital literacy support is currently in a very undeveloped state in Irish classrooms because of the disjunction between advocated policy on one hand and teacher understandings and supported practice on the other. It is evident that the importance of digital literacy needs to be made more explicit to all teachers at initial teacher education (ITE) and CPD levels as advocated by Sugrue (2002).

Guskey (2000) claims that teacher education and CPD opportunities are essential to ensure that the teaching profession remains dynamic and capable of evolving as circumstances change and complex issues arise. However, most of the surveyed teachers in this study felt that CPD for Irish teachers in the literacy area is currently both inadequate and infrequent and practically non-existent with respect to the digital literacy area. In many respects, teacher professional development in key curricular areas relies on teachers developing their own interests and skills incidentally and more formally through post-graduate study. As participant three noted: "I suppose it depends if a teacher is good at computers themselves or is interested in computers. Because I don't think we've ever had any professional development" (FG1, p.13). In Ireland, Concannon-Gibney and Murphy (2012) propose a progressive needs based model of CPD in literacy that supports teachers and schools in developing literacy pedagogy according to the challenges facing their specific situation. However, while CPD is prioritised in the Irish National Literacy Strategy (DES, 2011), it remains to be seen if adequate financial support will be provided to develop and implement an effective model for all teachers, which will impact on teachers' understandings and practices in literacy in the broadest possible sense.

The issue of teacher capabilities and confidence is a recurring topic across the digital literacy research literature (Dwyer, 2012; Marsh, 2009; Prensky, 2001; Leu, 2000a). It seems that increased levels of anxiety are being experienced by teachers as a result of the growing expectations on educators to integrate ICT seamlessly into classroom pedagogy, despite teachers' feelings of being unprepared for such practice. Notably, these concerns also emerged during the focus group discussions with the participating teachers in this study. Respondents commented on deficiencies in 'knowledge' (FG3, P10, p.13), 'expertise' (FG4, P16, p.14) and 'confidence' (FG4, P15, p.14) as significant obstacles to offering effective digital literacy support in Irish classrooms. Participant six captured these kinds of views explicitly in outlining: "I think my level of expertise is a barrier. Obviously, if I knew more, I could do more" (FG2, p.9). It would appear that a systemic professional environment would need to be created for teachers in line with the views of Merchant (2009), where creativity, innovation and reflection are promoted, and where teachers system wide are afforded the time to develop their understandings of and experimentation with digital literacy practices.

This discussion has highlighted some of the main barriers to the provision of effective digital literacy support in Irish classrooms. It would seem that the gap between government policy and classroom practice is clearly obstructing development. CPD for teachers in Ireland with respect to literacy, and especially pertaining to digital literacy, emerges as inadequate in spite of the reality that the understandings and competencies of the majority of teachers to adequately develop digital literacy urgently need to be addressed.

Looking forward

Literacy is continually evolving and extended research needs to continue to be undertaken to ensure learning environments in schools constantly embrace the ever changing literacy contexts and practices. The overall picture, which emerges from this small scale study, conducted in just one small geographical area, is one where considerable work needs to be done as a matter of urgency. Firstly, the onus is certainly on policy makers and teacher educators, in Ireland and internationally, to prioritise the building of teachers' understandings, beliefs and practices in the context of a broad and holistic understanding of literacy incorporating the everyday digital realities of 21st century school students. It is likely that this would be achieved through sustained and reformed programmes of initial teacher education and continuous professional development for all teachers, which emphasise and prioritise the reform of literacy pedagogy in all classrooms in line with contemporary digital developments. Secondly, there appears to be a crucial role for supporting teachers to engage in research where they are encouraged to experiment with technology across their pedagogy of literacy in a transformed child centred learning environment. Finally, in this light, further research which gives a voice to children and explores their digital literacy practices, including how they navigate and make sense of online spaces, needs to be conducted. How children feel about current literacy lessons in classrooms and whether or not this is affecting their engagement with literacy would also possibly merit investigation. It is only through such means that the literacy development experience of students in schools will be enhanced, which is especially vital in view of the primacy of language and literacy in enabling learning, establishing social identity and in later educational and vocational success.

Bibliography

Alvermann, D.E. (2008). Why Bother Theorizng Adolescents' Online Literacies for Classroom Practice and Research? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52(1), pp.8-19.

Barbour, R. (2007). *Doing Focus Groups*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Berg, B.L. (2009). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

Burnett, C., and Merchant, G. (2012). Learning, literacies and new technologies: the current context and future possibilities. In: J. Larson and J. Marsh (Eds), *The Handbook of Early Literacy*, London: Sage.

Burnett, C., Dickinson, P., Myers, J., and Merchant, G. (2006). Digital connections: transforming literacy in the primary school. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 36(1), pp.11-29.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2011). *Research Methods in Education*. New York: Routledge.

Coiro, J. (2009). Rethinking Online Reading Assessment, *Educational Leadership*, March, pp.59-63.

Coiro, J., and Dobler, E. (2007). Exploring the online reading comprehension strategies used by sixth-grade skilled readers to search for and locate information on the Internet. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 42(2), pp. 214-257.

Concannon-Gibney, T., and Murphy, B. (2012). School-based teacher professional development to transform reading comprehension: an Irish case study. *Professional Development in Education*, 38(1), pp.131-147.

Department Of Education And Skills. (2011). *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*. Dublin: Government Publications.

Dobson, T., and Willinsky, J. (2009). Digital Literacy. In: D. Olson and N. Torrance (Eds), *Cambridge Handbook of Literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dwyer, B. (2012). Meeting the Challenges of 21st Century Literacies: Equity and Excellence for all Students. In: A. Kelly, B. Dwyer, G. Mehigan and G. Watson, (Eds.) *Creating Multiple Pathways to Powerful Literacy in Challenging Times*. Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland.

Dwyer, B. (2010). *Scaffolding Internet Reading: A Study of a Disadvantaged School Community in Ireland*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nottingham: UK.

Garbe, C., Holle, K., and Weinhold, S. (2009). *Teaching Adolescent Struggling Readers. A Comparative Study of Good Practices in European Countries*. European Commission, ADORE project report. (Online accessed 21 January 2013). Available from: http://ec.europa.eu/education/transversal-programme/doc/studies/2006adore_en.pdf

Gee, J.P., and Levine, M.H. (2009). Welcome to Our Virtual Worlds. *Educational Leadership*, 66(6), pp.48-52. (Online accessed 17 January 2010). Available from: www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el200903_gee.pdf

Gee, J.P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. London: Routledge.

Government Of Ireland. (1999). *English: Language*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Government Of Ireland. (1999). *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Graham, L. (2008). Teachers are digikids too: the digital histories and digital lives of young teachers in English primary schools. *Literacy*, 42(1), pp.10-18.

Guskey, T.R. (2000). *Evaluating Professional Development*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Hall, K. (2008). Challenging traditional representations of texts and learning. *Literacy*, 42(3), pp.121-122.

Hamston, J. (2006). Pathways to multiliteracies: Student teachers' critical reflections on a multimodal text. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 29(1), pp.38-51.

Handsfield, L.J., Dean, T.R., and Cielocha, K.M. (2009). Becoming Critical Consumers and Producers of Text: Teaching Literacy with Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(1), pp. 40-50.

Hedberg, J.G., and Brudvik, O.C. (2008). Supporting Dialogic Literacy Through Mashing and Modding of Places and Spaces. *Theory Into Practice*, 47, pp.138-149.

International Reading Association. (2009). *New literacies and 21st century technologies: A position statement*. Newark, DE: IRA. (Online accessed 31 May 2014). Available from: www.reading.org/Libraries/position-statements-and-resolutions/ps1067_NewLiteracies21stCentury.pdf

Jewitt, C. (2005). Multimodality, "Reading", and "Writing" for the 21st Century. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 26(3), pp.315-331.

Kamil, M.L., Intrator, S.M., and Kim, H.S. (2000). The Effects of Other Technologies on Literacy and Literacy Learning. In: M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson and R. Barr (Eds), *Handbook of Reading Research Volume 3*, New Jersey: Laurence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

Kennedy, E., Dunphy, E., Dwyer, B., Hayes, G., Mc Phillips, T., Marsh, J., O'Connor, M., and Shiel, G. (2012). *Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3-8 years)*. NCCA, Research Report No. 15 (Online accessed 14 January 2014). Available from: www.ncca.ie/en/Publications/Reports/Literacy_in_Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education_3-8_years.pdf

Kinzer, C.K. (2005). The Intersection of Schools, Communities, and Technology: Recognizing Children's Use of New Literacies. In: R.A. Karchmer, M.H. Mallette, J. Kara-Soteriou and D.J. Leu, *Innovative Approaches to Literacy Education: Using the Internet to Support New Literacies*, USA: International Reading Association, Inc.

Krueger, R.A. (1994). *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research*. London: Sage Publications.

Lambirth, A. (2003). "They get enough of that at home": understanding aversion to popular culture in schools. *Reading*, 37(1), pp. 9-13.

Lankshear, C., and Knobel, M. (2006). *New Literacies: Everyday Practices & Classroom Learning second edition*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Larson, J., and Marsh, J. (2006). *Making Literacy Real: theories and practices for learning and teaching*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Leu, D.J., Coiro, J., Castek, J., Hartman, D.K., Henry, L.A., Reinking, D. (2008). Research on instruction and assessment of the new literacies of online reading comprehension. In C.C. Block, S. Parris, and P. Afflerbach (Eds). *Comprehension instruction: Research based best practices.* New York: Guilford Press.

Leu, D.J. Jr., Mallette, M.H., Karchmer, R.A., and Kara-Soteriou, J. (2005). Contextualizing the New Literacies of Information and Communication Technologies in Theory, Research and Practice. In: R.A. Karchmer, M.H. Mallette, J. Kara-Soteriou and D.J. Leu, *Innovative Approaches to Literacy Education: Using the Internet to Support New Literacies*, USA: International Reading Association, Inc.

Leu, D.J. Jr. (2000a). Literacy and Technology: Deictic Consequences for Literacy Education in an Information Age. In: M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson and R. Barr (Eds), *Handbook of Reading Research Volume 3*, New Jersey: Laurence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

Leu, D.J. Jr. (2000b). Our children's future: Changing the focus of literacy and literacy instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 53(5), pp.424-429.

Livingstone, S. (2004). Media literacy and the challenge of new information and communication technologies. *The Communication Review*, 7, pp.3-14.

Marsh, J. (2011). Young Children's Literacy Practices in a Virtual World: Establishing an Online Interaction Order. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 46(2), pp.101-118.

Marsh, J. (2009). Literacy Teaching and Learning in the Digital Era. In: B. Culligan (Ed), *The Changing Landscapes of Literacy – Building Best Practice*. Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland.

Marsh, J. (2007). Digital Childhoods, Digital Classrooms: The Teaching and Learning of Literacy in a New Media Age. In: B. Dwyer and G. Shiel, (Eds.) *Literacy at the Crossroads: Moving forward, Looking back*. Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland.

Mc Gowan, M. (2005). My Internet Projects and Other Online Resources for the Literacy Classroom. In: R.A. Karchmer, M.H. Mallette, J. Kara-Soteriou and D.J. Leu, *Innovative Approaches to Literacy Education: Using the Internet to Support New Literacies*. USA: International Reading Association, Inc.

Mc Kenna, M.C., Reinking, D., Labbo, L.D., and Kieffer, R.D. (1999). The Electronic Transformation of Literacy and its Implications for the Struggling Reader. *Reading and Writing Quarterly,* 15, pp.111-126.

Merchant, G. (2009). Literacy in virtual worlds. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 32(1), pp.38-56.

Merchant, G. (2007). Writing the future in the digital age. *Literacy*, 41(3), pp.118-128.

Merchant, G. (2005). Digikids: cool dudes and the new writing. *E-learning*, 2(1), pp. 50-60.

Millard, E., and Marsh, J. (2001). Sending Minnie the Minx Home: comics and reading choices. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 31(1), pp.25-38.

Mills, K.A. (2010). Shrek Meets Vygotsky: Rethinking Adolescents' Multimodal Literacy Practices in Schools. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 54(1), pp.35-45.

Moran, J., Ferdig., R.E., Pearson, P.D., Wardrop, J., and Blomeyer, R.L. Jr. (2008). Technology and Reading Performance in the Middle-School Grades: A Meta-Analysis with Recommendations for Policy and Practice. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 40(6), pp.6-35.

Mulcahy, C.M. (2010). A Transformative Literacy for the 21st Century. In: T. Concannon-Gibney, A. Kelly and K. Willoughby (Eds), *Literacy in the 21st Century: Perspectives, Challenges and Transformations.* Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland.

Murphy, B. (2009). Curriculum Contestation – A Retrospective and Prospective Look at the Case of Reading Development in Ireland. In: B. Culligan (Ed), *The Changing Landscapes of Literacy – Building Best Practice.* Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland.

National College Of Ireland. (2009). *Digital Literacy: New Approaches to Participation and Inquiry Learning to Foster Literacy Skills among Primary School Children.* (Online accessed 14 January 2010). Available from: www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/9765/Digital_Literacy_in_Primary_Schools_-_Research_Report.pdf?sequence=4

National Council For Curriculum And Assessment. (2004). *Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the Primary School Curriculum.* (Online accessed 4 February 2012). Available from: www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/ecpe/ictenglish.pdf

O' Leary, M. (2006). Towards a Balanced System for Irish Primary and Secondary Schools. *Oideas*, 52, pp.7-24.

Pahl, K., and Rowsell, J. (2005). *Literacy and Education: Understanding the New Literacy Studies in the Classroom*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Perkins, R., Moran, G., Shiel, G., and Cosgrove, J. (2011). *Reading Literacy in PISA 2009: A Guide for Teachers.* (Online accessed 14 December 2011). Available from: www.erc.ie/documents/po9teachersguide.pdf

Prensky, M. (2001). *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants.* (Online accessed 14 December 2011). Available from: www.markprensky.com/writing/prensky%20%20digital%20natives,%20digital%20immigrants%20-%20part1.pdf

Reinking, D., Labbo, L.D., and Mc Kenna, M.C. (2000). From Assimilation to Accommodation: A Developmental Framework for Integrating Digital Technologies into Literacy Research and Instruction. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 23(2), pp. 110-112.

Rowsell, J., and Burke, A. (2009). Reading by Design: Two Case Studies of Digital Reading Practices. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 53(2), pp.106-118.

Ryan, A.B. (2006). Methodology: Analysing Qualitative Data and Writing up your Findings. In: M. Antonesa, H. Fallon, A.B. Ryan, A. Ryan, T. Walsh, and L. Borys, *Researching and Writing your Thesis: a guide for postgraduate students*. Maynooth: MACE.

Sangiuliano, G. (2005). Books on Tape for Kids: A Language Arts-Based Service-Learning Project. In: R.A. Karchmer, M.H. Mallette, J. Kara-Soteriou and D.J. Leu, *Innovative Approaches to Literacy Education: Using the Internet to Support New Literacies*. USA: International Reading Association, Inc.

Shenton, A., and Pagett, L. (2007). From 'bored' to screen: the use of the interactive whiteboard for literacy in six primary classrooms in England. *Literacy* 41(3), pp.129-135.

Shiel, G. (2011). Recent National (NA) and International (PISA) Assessments in Ireland: Key Findings and Implications. Seminar at Cork Education Centre, January 24th 2011. (Online accessed 10 December 2011). Available from: www.reading.ie/sites/default/files/documents/Seminars/Shiels_Seminar_Cork2011.pdf

Somekh, B. (2007). *Pedagogy and Learning with ICT: Researching the art of innovation*. New York: Routledge.

Spalter, A.M., and Van Dam, A. (2008). Digital Visual Literacy. *Theory Into Practice*, 47, pp.93-108.

Stewart, D.W., Shamdasani, P.M., and Rook, D.W. (2007). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*, second edition. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Street, B.V., and Efstein, A. (2007). *Literacy: an advanced resource book*. New York: Routledge.

Sugrue, C. (2002). Irish Teachers' Experiences of Professional Learning: implications for policy and practice. *Journal of In-Service Education*, 28(2), pp.311-338.

Tan, L., and Guo, L. (2010). From Print to Critical Multimedia Literacy: One Teacher's Foray Into New Literacies Practices. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53(4), pp.315-324.

The Teaching Council. (2011). *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education*. (Online accessed 15 December 2011). Available from: www.teachingcouncil.ie/_fileupload/Teacher%20Education/FINAL%20TC_Policy_Paper_SP.pdf

Turel, Y.K., and Johnson, T.E. (2012). Teachers' Belief and Use of Interactive Whiteboards for Teaching and Learning. *Educational Technology & Society*, 15(1), pp.381-194.

Walsh, M. (2006). The 'textual shift': Examining the reading process with print, visual and multimodal texts. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 29(1), pp.24-37.

Walsh, M. (2008). Worlds have collided and modes have merged: classroom evidence of changed literacy practices. *Literacy*, 42(2), pp.101-108.

Walsh, C. (2007). Creativity as capital in the literacy classroom: youth as multimodal designers. *Literacy*, 41(2), pp.79-85.

Warschauer, M. (2008). Laptops and Literacy: A Multi-Site Case Study. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 3, pp.52-67.

Warschauer, M., and Matuchniak, T. (2010). New technology and digital worlds: Analyzing evidence of equity and access, use, and outcomes. *Review of Research in Education*, 34(1), pp.179-225.

An exploration of formative assessment practices on children's academic efficacy

CAROL CONSTANT AND TRACEY CONNOLLY

Abstract

As teachers we strive to enable our students to reach to the best of their abilities. Through formative assessment we seek to establish our students' prior knowledge, plan for where they are going next and evaluate what needs to be done to get them there (Black and William 2009). Formative assessment is an interactive process students actively engage in the construct of their own knowledge and skills (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Wood 2011). Evidence has shown that formative assessment can produce an increase in student achievement (Black and William 1998b). This paper shows how formative assessment strategies were introduced into a mainstream primary school classroom and its effects on students' academic efficacy was investigated. A key premise of the research is that, for students to be able to develop their academic efficacy, they must develop their capacity to monitor the quality of their work. This research argues that these skills can be developed by providing formative assessment opportunities to students. The research highlights the opportunities and challenges arising from the investigation and concludes by proposing possible ways of implementing formative assessment practices for the improvement of teaching and learning.

Keywords: **assessment for learning, student efficacy, eagerness to learn, national policy.**

Introduction

Assessment is considered vital to the education process. Taken together, the Education Act (1998), the Primary School Curriculum (1999) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum* (2007), along with the development of the *National Strategy for the Improvement of Literacy and Numeracy among Young People* (2011) provide a key context for the form and content of assessment procedures within the Irish education system. The Education Act (1998) places a statutory requirement on schools to assess students and report the results of assessment to parents. The revised Primary School Curriculum (1999) provides the educational rationale for assessment in the teaching and learning process and contains a statement on assessment for each individual subject. These assessment statements outline the formative, summative and evaluative functions of assessment. The revised Primary School Curriculum (1999) further emphasises the role of formative classroom-based assessment and its use in the progression of students' learning. The successive policies delineate both the development of thinking on assessment in Ireland and the principle concerns that assessment should address.

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

As teachers we seek to establish our students' prior knowledge, plan for where they are going next and evaluate what needs to be done to get them there (Black and Wiliam, 2009:7). According to Thompson (2007), these three processes provide the theoretical foundation for formative assessment. Assessment is conceptualised as an interactive process whereby students actively engage in the construction of their own knowledge and skills (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Wood, 2011). Assessment is driven by what teachers and students do within the classroom. Evidence has shown that formative assessment is an essential component of classroom practice and available research indicates that formative assessment can produce a significant increase in student achievement (Black and William, 1998b). Assessment for Learning (AfL) achieves this by blending pedagogical and cognitive practices with social interaction and by placing the learner at the centre of the assessment process.

The *Primary School Curriculum* states that assessment is the means by which the teacher forms a picture of the short-term and long-term need of a student and plans future learning accordingly (DES, 1999:17). Assessment is concerned with gathering information and it refers to all activities undertaken by the teacher and the students which provide evidence that can be used to modify and improve teaching and learning activities. Assessment becomes formative assessment when this information is used to amend teaching to better meet the needs of the students (Black and Wiliam 1998b, p.2). Formative assessment involves activities such as monitoring students' progress, providing feedback, using prior knowledge, the integration of learning goals and involving students in peer and self-assessment (Shepard, 2000; Stiggins and Popham, 2008). The distinction between Assessment of Learning (AoL) and Assessment for Learning (AfL) is central to assessment practices.

According to Stiggins and Popham (2008), formative assessment is especially likely to influence students' academic efficacy and eagerness to learn. They assert that if AfL is operating successfully in a classroom, students' perception of their individual academic ability should either remain high or improve (Stiggins and Popham, 2008, p.1). This is because students will be continuously involved in successful learning experiences. The result of this success will encourage students to engage in learning and simultaneously affect their eagerness to learn. While there are undoubtedly many other outcomes connected to the effective implementation of formative assessment practices, this small scale study focuses its investigation on monitoring and analysing the impact of formative assessment practices on students' academic efficacy and their ability to learn.

Traditionally, it has been the teacher who was considered responsible for these components of a student's education but it is our belief that this responsibility should be shared with the learner (Black and Wiliam, 1998b; Shepard, 2000; Pollard, 1996; Popham, 2008). Formative assessment refers to frequent, interactive assessments of student progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching (Black and Wiliam, 2009). The positive impact of such assessment practices have been widely acknowledged (Black and Wiliam, 1998b; Elder and Paul, 2008; Torrence and Pryor, 2001). Furthermore, international research indicates that such an approach to assessment develops confident, motivated students and promotes the goals of lifelong learning.

Research context

This paper relates formative assessment practices to educational policy and pedagogical initiatives, while at the same time identifying potential ways of enhancing teaching methodologies to assist the effective implementation of formative assessment. One of the primary purposes of this research is to produce practical knowledge and information in relation to the process of formative assessment. It sets out to develop a framework for formative assessment that is transferable to varying class levels to contribute to the improvement of whole school assessment practice and policy. The classroom research was carried out with a third class in an Irish primary school by the class teacher. The main focus of the research was to investigate each student's academic efficacy and then monitor and evaluate changes following eight weeks of explicit formative assessment participation. Hence, the research investigates if the implementation of formative assessment strategies has an impact on students' academic efficacy. In addition to this, the research explores if participation with formative assessment procedures has any other effects for the individual students or the class group and if there is an impact on pedagogical practices and teaching methodologies used when the systematic use of formative assessment is used in daily classroom instruction.

Formative assessment can involve reporting students' final performance and grade but more importantly documenting what processes need to be undertaken in order to raise achievement in the future (Harlen, 2005, p.217). The past decades have seen a surge in research within the area of formative assessment. In terms of literature, Black and Wiliam (1998b) frequently cited evidence that formative assessment has a positive impact on student achievement. Black and Wiliam (1998b) drew this conclusion from reviewing in excess of 250 articles related to formative assessment. Their review cited evidence from several leading educational researchers from Australia, Switzerland, Hong Kong and the USA. In their writings they stated that the research they reviewed "shows conclusively that formative assessment does improve learning" and related increases in student achievement were "amongst the largest ever reported" (Black and Wiliam 1998a, p.61). This substantiates the view that formative assessment should be embedded in the ongoing instructional activities of the classroom.

The theory of formative assessment is relevant to the broad spectrum of learning outcomes and subject areas represented in the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). Formative assessment is an ongoing process. It involves responding to the student's learning in order to enable progression. Teachers must engage students in their own learning by providing rich feedback, using effective questioning and involving students in peer and self-assessment (Black and Wiliam 2009). The goal of formative assessment is to enable learners to further their own learning for, as Bruner (1960:17) stated in his early writing "the first object of any act of learning… is that it should serve us in the future. Learning should not only take us somewhere, it should allow us to go further more easily".

Black and Wiliam (1998a, p.10) defined formative assessment as "all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged". Later Popham (2006) suggested that assessment can be considered formative insofar as the information collected from the assessment is used within the assessment period, in order to

improve instruction to meet the needs of the students. Furthermore, in 2008 Popham stated that, formative assessment is a planned process during which the teacher or the student use assessment based evidence to modify the learning and instruction in progress. These explanations of assessment all differ significantly from those traditionally found in educational research. Formative assessment places the focus of the learning on the strategies students are using and not just on the outcomes they reach (Shepard, 2000a).

Formative assessment rejects the transmission model of teaching and seeks to actively engage students in the learning process. Research has found that the learning that takes place in school should be practical and related to the world that exists outside school (DES 1999). This not only makes learning more interesting and motivating for the students, it also enables students to develop the ability to use knowledge in a real context. This is an essential feature of formative assessment as throughout the process students will be required to transfer knowledge and skills within differing contexts. They will also be enabled to understand that teacher instruction and formative assessment are indivisible (Black and Wiliam, 1998a).

In addition to the development of cognitive skills, formative assessment practices also foster and encourage the development of learning dispositions such as students' eagerness to learn and ability to face challenges (Shepard 2000; Stiggins and Popham 2008). Available research suggests that formative assessment produces increases in students' achievement (Black and Wiliam 1998a). However, the process of how formative assessment is conceptualised and implemented still varies depending on context. Nonetheless, international researchers in the area of formative assessment recognise some key features of the process as being the following:

- learning goals should be clearly identified and articulated to the students,
- students should be provided with feedback that is linked to success criteria,
- both peer and self-evaluation are important for the development of metacognitive skills, and
- a climate of collaborative learning must be established between teacher and students. (Black and Wiliam, 2009:8)

These elements are vital to effective implementation of formative assessment. However, any attempt to change the form and purpose of classroom assessment must acknowledge prevailing beliefs, as conflict between instruction and assessment can arise as a result of differing views between old and new visions of teaching and learning (Shepard, 2000a).

Research aims and methodology

The research aims of this action research project were to investigate and develop formative assessment strategies in the primary school classroom from a practical perspective. It considered how formative assessment strategies can be incorporated into pedagogical practice to bring about changes in classroom assessment procedures. It sought to analyse the impact of explicit formative assessment instruction on students' academic efficacy and their eagerness to learn. The study aimed to answer if the implementations of formative assessment strategies have an impact on students' academic efficacy.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggest it is impossible to improve teaching without first developing an awareness of the situation in which it is carried out. This statement supported the ethnographic nature of the study. According to LeCompte and Preissle (1993), ethnographic research is a process which involves various methods of inquiry, an outcome and a subsequent record of the inquiry. The central aim of this research was to provide rich, holistic insights into students' views and actions, taking into consideration the social setting within which they occur.

The research was divided into three phases of implementation. Phase one was devoted to pre-intervention investigation and research. The teacher, as researcher, reflected on how assessment activities were currently managed. Students participated in a pre-intervention inventory and questionnaire to ascertain perceptions of academic efficacy and eagerness to learn. This was conducted before participants were exposed to explicit formative assessment instruction for the purposes of comparison at the later stage.

Phase two was concerned with the implementation of formative assessment strategies. Having previously identified aspects of formative assessment for improvement, strategies were put into operation to change the practices of teaching and learning.

Finally, phase three was focused on gathering and analysing post-intervention data to evaluate any changes and developments that occurred as a result of the intervention. This was undertaken from both the students' and the teacher's perspective.

The study was implemented over an eight-week period. It was recognised that was quite a limited period of time and, therefore, specific formative assessment strategies were prioritised. The strategies prioritised were learning goals, KWL (Know, Want to Learn, Learned) charts, rubrics, work samples with comments and individual and peer task review sheets. These were incorporated into the repertoire of the students' activities. Effective questioning and feedback were used by the teacher to supplement the outcomes of these strategies for the students.

Data collection

Stringer (2007) encourages the inclusion of students in action research interventions as it allows them the opportunity to construct their own knowledge. Qualitative research studies have verified that students are able to provide important insights into their own lives and education. In the context of this action research study, data collection methods concerned with listening to the voices of students have been incorporated.

Observation was a fundamental method in this qualitative inquiry to gain an accurate picture of the behaviours that are occurring in the classroom. It involved systematic noting and recording of events and behaviours within the social context of the study.

The use of the Student Affect Inventory (Popham and Stiggins, 2008) and a questionnaire at the beginning of the action research project were useful as they enabled the researchers to collect a range of information with relative ease. It was also a simple means of gathering information in relation to students' attitudes before the intervention took place (Koshy, 2005). Once completed, the questionnaires were used as a baseline for evaluating children's

attitudes and opinions and they were also used as a means of establishing a line of questioning for further data collection (Koshy, 2005).

A primary benefit of questionnaires is that they allow the collection of independent, impartial, open-minded data. They also enable comparison of responses between participants. This process was embarked on both pre and post the intervention period. However, it was necessary to take into consideration some potential challenges when administering questionnaires to students. As Scott (2000) highlights, literacy and numeracy difficulties may exist amongst some of the research sample, which could impact upon data collected. In addition, it is necessary to take cognisance of students' natural desire to give the correct answer.

As a means of establishing the quality, appropriateness and functionality of the questionnaire designed for students, a pilot questionnaire was administered to an alternative group of third class students. The purpose of this activity was to check the students' understanding of questions, to highlight areas of confusion and identify any administration errors.

Prior to the commencement of the study, informed consent was granted by the board of management of the school and the parents/guardians of the selected research sample. Parents/guardians of the participating children received a letter of consent outlining a detailed description of the initiative being undertaken and all participants were given the option to opt out of the study.

Research findings – pre-intervention

Analysis in action research is not about certainties but possibilities. It is not about why things have to be the way they are but rather what can be done to change a situation (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009). The aim of the intervention was to combine international research (Bennett 2010; Black and Wiliam, 1998a; 1998b; Shepard, 2000 and Stiggins and Popham, 2008) with national policy (DES, 2011; DES, 2000; NCCA, 2007) and curriculum (DES, 1999) to form a practical and applied perspective.

Formative assessment is a complex process and demands more than the elicitation of evidence from data gathered (Bennett, 2011). It involves analysing this evidence and making inferences based on conclusions. Like leading research in the area (Torrence and Pryor, 2001), this analysis is used to relate formative assessment practises to further improve teaching and learning.

The notions of self-perception, academic efficacy and eagerness to learn are problematic in relation to analysis and conclusions. They are dependent upon the beliefs and values reinforcing the individual perspective. Despite this, we believe that the research established credibility through active engagement between teacher and students, a multifaceted approach to data collection and a triangulation of results. Similarly, our conception of the validity of formative assessment measures rests within the triangulated view of the learning constructs which were being measured, the activities utilised to elicit students' responses and the use of an interpretive framework to understand and analyse these (Herman et al., 2010).

The overall aim of the research was to critically investigate the effects of explicit formative assessment strategies on students' academic efficacy and eagerness to learn. This could only be achieved by first establishing the students' perspectives of themselves as learners, what they thought learning is and what understanding they had of the concept of assessment. In order to statistically examine the impact of formative assessment strategies on students' academic efficacy and eagerness to learn, the Student Affect Inventory as created by Stiggins and Popham (2008) in affiliation with the Council of Chief State School Officers was administered to all participants at the commencement and the conclusion of the study. This was done in conjunction with an open ended questionnaire to elicit more in-depth responses from the students. These instruments gathered students' responses and opinions within four distinct aspects of the learning process:

- clear learning targets,
- receiving progress monitoring information,
- academic efficacy, and
- eagerness to learn

(Stiggins and Popham, 2008, p.4).

For our study, this inventory was administered to all participants at the commencement and the conclusion of the study.

Clear learning strategies

As part of the Student Affect Inventory, students were asked to respond to two statements in relation to their perceived clarity of learning goals. The first positively phrased statement was, "I usually understand what I am supposed to be learning". The second statement was contrastingly written and asserted, "Very often, I'm not certain about what I am supposed to be learning". These statements derive from the learning targets approach to formative assessment and are centred on the belief that learning goals focus the students' thinking, and allow for increased academic success and motivation to learn (Herman et al., 2010; Torrence and Pryor, 2001). Within this approach the students were made explicitly aware of the expected outcomes of the learning activity and the steps required to achieving task completion and success. Eighty six per cent of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they understood what they are supposed to be learning, whereas a minority (3%) disagreed.

Formative assessment advocates sharing learning targets with the students (Wiliam et al., 2004). While the Student Affect Inventory revealed an awareness of the purpose of a learning activity, the pre-intervention questionnaire results suggested the students did not feel this was consistently the case. When asked, "Do you always know what you are supposed to be learning during a lesson?", 19 of the 28 participants replied positively, with nine out of 28 students responding negatively. Of the 19 positive responses, 10 students made specific reference to the topic of the lesson. They interpreted this as information relative to potential learning goals and outcomes. These results indicate that there was a lack of depth in the learning goals provided to the students. They may have had an awareness of what they were supposed to be learning, but the results imply they did not have an understanding of learning content or goals.

Progress monitoring information

As asserted by Schunk (2004), the ability to self monitor work is a skill necessary for effective formative assessment. This process focuses the students' attention on what they are doing and causes them to reflect on their thinking as it occurs. However, self monitoring cannot occur without access to target goals and outcomes. This inter-dependence is reflected in the findings of the Student Affect Inventory and the student questionnaire. Once again, a correlation of results can be found between the positively and negatively framed questions. The students were again required to respond to two parallel statements. They were statement three and statement eight of the administered inventory, "Typically, I don't know if I am making progress as fast as I should" and "I get plenty of information to keep track of my own learning growth".

Statement eight, elicited relatively similar results to those found in relation to learning targets. An overall majority (52%) felt they were receiving sufficient guidance to monitor progress. However, those who had previously strongly disagreed with statement one remarked they had minimum awareness of what they were learning. This highlights the mutually supportive role of learning goals and progress monitoring information to enable the students to self monitor and assess.

The questionnaire further revealed that the students accepted insubstantial information as a means of monitoring their progress, citing remarks such as 'good, 'go maith' and 'keep it up' as sufficient for tracking their progress. When asked, "How do you know if your work is 'good?'" one child remarked that, "I know my work is good when teacher puts a star, or a tick, or writes, good work or excellent on my page". This non-descriptive feedback inhibits the students' ability to self-monitor progress. These findings identify the need for the implementation of formative assessment strategies specifically to guide student awareness of their progress and development. This will be done through the utilisation of KWL charts, traffic lights, rubrics and formative feedback as advocated by experts in the area of formative assessment.

Academic efficacy

Henk and Melnick (1995, p.471) see self efficacy as a "person's judgements of her or his own ability to perform an activity, and the effect this perception has on the ongoing and future conduct of the activity". These judgements can have an impact on the performance and achievement levels of individuals by influencing variables such as task involvement and avoidance, as well as effort applied and expectations of outcomes. The results of this category were surprising. In reply to statement two, "If I'm asked to learn new things, even if they are difficult, I know I can learn", eight out of 28 students asserted a lack of belief in their ability to learn new things. A comparable 10 out of 28 students responded positively to statement seven, "Even if I get lots of help and plenty of time, it is hard for me to learn new things". This level of response made academic efficacy the lowest scoring category of the Student Affect Inventory.

An individual's self-perceived ability in a particular area is a key feature of self efficacy. It can impact on a student's development socially and academically. These self perceptions

also impact on a student's motivation to learn and can promote or inhibit their want and ability to do so (Henk and Melnick, 1995).

Eagerness to learn

According to Black and Wiliam (1998a), a student's eagerness to learn can have a significant impact on their academic effectiveness and success. There is significant evidence that, with the implementation of suitable formative assessment, activities can positively impact on both student motivation and achievement (Stiggins and Popham, 2008). Statement four, "I'm excited to learn new things in school" prompted a majority of positive responses. In contrast, statement six, "Lots of the time I don't look forward to learning new things in school" elicited a majority of negative responses. The percentage of students who strongly disagreed with the statement may be indicative of students who are experiencing learning difficulties and have developed a negative attitude as a defence against failure. Low academic efficacy could also potentially impact upon their eagerness to learn.

When asked, "Do you like learning new things? Why/Why Not?" students' comments consisted of, "I love learning new things because that's how you get smarter," "I really enjoy learning new things because it is exciting and interesting," and "I think it is good to learn new things in school because that way school is never boring. I don't like it when we just revise old things".

At the opposite end of the spectrum, negative responses to the same question included; "I don't like learning new things because it is hard for me," "I don't like learning new things because I might get in trouble if I get it wrong," and "I don't like when we start new things in maths, it is really confusing and I forget what to do in my copy". The range of replies is indicative of the range of attitudes and abilities within the research group. For the purpose of this investigation, the focus will be on tracking those with low eagerness to learn to monitor and observe any developments throughout the research period.

One stark realisation on evaluation of pre-intervention data was that students were generally unclear of the purposes of assessment. The general consensus was that assessment was 'something teachers do'. This is in conflict with the NCCA's document, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum*, which identifies assessment as, "the child's perspective on the world and on his/her experience of learning" (2007, p.77). When questioned on, "What is the purpose of assessment?" 81% of students commented that assessment was solely for the use of the teacher. One reply stated that "teacher gives us tests sometimes so she knows what to teach us again". Another reply echoed this by saying, "We get tests so teacher can find out what we are good and bad at".

Another view of assessment, as elicited by the questionnaire, was that assessment exclusively involved tests. When asked what activities are done in school to check how much you are learning, a startling 86% of students identified tests as the only from of assessment used by teachers, while a mere 22% mentioned questioning or class activities as means of assessment. Testing was also revealed to be a stressful activity for students with 82% of participants questioned providing negative remarks towards assessment. One student stated that, "I hate tests cause I get confused and nervous and then get things wrong". This remark is reflective of the attitude of the majority involved in the intervention.

Research findings – post-intervention

Learning targets

The provision of learning targets to the students had an overall positive effect on their perceptions and understanding of what they are learning. This can be seen in the responses given in the pre and post student affect inventory. Clarifying learning targets was also found to have a positive impact on students' self-assessment as one student mentioned in the questionnaire that, "I like the targets because I know when I'll have everything done". Another student observed that "The targets help me in school by making me able to count what I can do and what I got to do".

Post intervention questionnaire findings revealed a substantial 24 out of 28 students claiming to have knowledge of what they are learning. When responding again to the question, "Do you know what you are supposed to be learning during a lesson?" students made remarks such as; "Yeah, teacher gives us our targets at the start so I know what we are going to be doing," and "Yes I know what I am supposed to be learning because before we start learning something new teacher gives us bullet points about it".

We found the provision of evaluation criteria by means of learning targets and rubrics enabled the students to better understand expectations and desired outcomes. This finding is echoed in the responses of the students. One student stated that, "I like now that teacher tells us what we will have to learn for each thing we do". Another student reported that, "when I know what I should do it makes it easier to get everything done". Another reply showed awareness of the steps involved in reaching a target, "it's good to know what to do next so you never have to stop". These statements indicate that the students were beginning to understand that there are goals they have to reach and a process involved in doing so. These findings provide support for Stiggins (2001) who held the belief that the students should become the main users of assessment information.

Of the strategies employed, students' comments and feedback in relation to the use of rubrics were continuously the most positive. Students liked the fact that the rubric provided them with information in relation to what was expected of them. It also allowed them to monitor their progress and development. One student stated that "the squares said about full stops... and I always forget them… this reminded me that I should try not to from now on". This feedback pointed to the increasing autonomy of learners through formative assessment, "It's better 'cause now teacher won't have to tell me all the time… I don't like that cause I should know already".

A few students were observed to be transferring the use of particular strategies to alternative purposes. They realised that their interpretation of 'good' writing for English activities was directly applicable to written activities within history, geography and other curricular areas. This finding demonstrates the cyclical nature of formative assessment as described by Black and Wiliam (1998b). One student spontaneously began to apply the use of rubrics to homework. When the teacher mentioned this to the class, they reacted very positively to the idea and praised the individual. The teacher then prompted a class discussion as to how this idea could be used to help the whole class. The solution devised by the students was that they should get a small version to keep in their homework journal. This suggestion

was acted upon and resulted in a noticeable improvement in the quality of the homework completed.

Progress monitoring information

When comparing the results of data gathered in relation to progress monitoring information, a shift can be seen in student replies. When asked, "How do you know if you are making enough progress in school?" 25 out of 28 students made reference to specific formative assessment strategies. In their responses the students also revealed an understanding of the purpose of the strategies. Some of their responses included, "I know I have learned enough if I have lots of information in the 'L' on my KWL chart", "I know because lots of times I can do everything on my rubric," and "I know I am making enough progress if I used all of the criteria".

These comments also expose a decreasing reliance on external cues and social feedback for information and affirmation about individual achievement. Post-intervention revealed only three of the 28 participants who identified the teacher as the sole means of recognising progress versus nine of the 28 participants at the pre-intervention stage. These findings strongly indicate that the students were now increasingly aware of the need to reflect cognitively on the processes involved in learning. Without critical thinking being of central importance to the process of Assessment for Learning (AfL), it is unlikely that students would have been enabled to change their understanding of what a good learner is and develop their skills accordingly.

Academic efficacy

In general, the most significant change in student academic efficacy was observed amongst what we, as the researchers, would have considered the 'reluctant' participants. These students vary in ability from extremely capable to the weaker end of the scale. Prior to the intervention, these students generally disliked participation in class discussions and rarely volunteered insights or answers. By contrast, post intervention, they are active and engaged students.

When analysing the answer to "Do you always try your best at your work?", findings revealed that 35% of participating students do not try to succeed if they have assumed that failure is inevitable. This was an area of major improvement as the post intervention survey revealed a decrease of 15% in this category.

Eagerness to learn

The increase in students responding positively to statement four highlights the associations between students' perception of clear learning targets, academic efficacy and their eagerness to learn. Wiliam et al., (2004) state that the use of learning targets will encourage and motivate children to learn and our data confirms this conclusion.

Comparative analysis

A comparative analysis of the results to the question, "What parts of your work would you

like to improve at?" highlights the increased awareness the students have with regard to their work. Pre-intervention, 22 of the 28 students remarked that they would like to improve their handwriting; 19 indicated that they would like to get an increased volume of work completed and a further 23 students mentioned decreasing the quantity of errors in their work. These areas of concern for the students display minimal awareness of the thinking process. The post-intervention results, in contrast to this, elicited statements such as, "I hope I can become better at knowing why I do stuff in maths… lots of times I get the answer right but only because teacher told us what to do". Another student explained that he would "like to be able to figure things out by himself". However these reflective responses are not indicative of all students within the research group and, despite their interaction with formative assessment practices, eight of the 28 children made no change to the aspect of their work that they would like to improve.

The questionnaire results reveal similar findings in relation to the children's concepts of what constitutes a good learner. At the pre-intervention stage, students commented that characteristics such as 'good writing', 'getting everything right', and 'knowing all the words' were attributes of 'good' work. The rationale behind these features being identified by the students is that they are visible features of work and easily measured and assessed both by themselves and their peers. The same question administered to the students in the post intervention questionnaire revealed a broadening of understanding of the concept of a good learner. Throughout the duration of the intervention, students had become increasingly aware that a 'good' learner was someone who "tries their best even if they are not good at something" someone "who thinks a lot even if they don't do much writing", and someone who "gets what the teacher is explaining". These findings would indicate that increased participation in formative assessment strategies alters children's perception of learning. This echoes the views of Elder and Paul (2007) who endorse formative assessment as a means of developing critical thinking and meta-cognition.

The questionnaire also revealed that the students' perception of their learning environment influenced their responses and approaches to learning activities. Children made claims such as: "I don't like when the class is serious for maths", "I like it when we do stuff with our friends, it's noisy… but fun", and "I like working best when everyone is concentrating and quiet, it helps me concentrate". These informative and contradictory statements highlight the unique learning approaches and styles of individual students. We believe that this emphasises the need for the teacher to cater for a range of learning styles to satisfy the needs of all the students in the class.

Conclusion

As a result of participating in explicit formative assessment instruction, the students participated in an integrated approach to assessment and instruction. With learning goals to the fore-front of lessons, the students constantly evaluated whether or not they were making expected progress and made adjustments to their learning as necessary. The students actively engaged in the learning experience and were encouraged to take ownership of it. They became increasingly autonomous learners, as they were equipped with the necessary strate-

gies and skills to evaluate their learning effectively. The use of rubrics, KWL charts, traffic lights, reviews and descriptive feedback, allowed students to identify what, why and how they were to proceed with a learning activity. The focus was no longer on the quantity of work completed, rather on the quality of the work undertaken by the individual student.

The classroom culture the students learn in was transformed as a result of formative assessment practices. Students were no longer anxious about making mistakes. Formative assessment created a culture that highlighted areas of strength, while simultaneously affirming the value of mistakes. This increased students' academic efficacy and improved motivation and eagerness to learn.

Classroom assessment as advocated by leading researchers (Black and Wiliam, 1998b; Shepard, 2000) should be integrated with the instructional process, so that teachers can understand and consolidate student learning. In view of this, a primary aim of this research was to build on the teacher's capacity in formative assessment practices. Formative assessment enabled the teacher to better identify students who were struggling, or who were operating under misunderstandings and misconceptions. Significantly, formative assessment generated a shift in the teacher student relationship, as the students became increasingly responsible for their learning; they became partners in the process of teaching and learning.

Formative assessment can provide information for improvement at all levels of the education system. At the classroom level teachers can be enabled to gather information about student learning and understanding. This can be used to improve and modify teaching to meet the needs of the students. At school level formative assessment provides the opportunity for school leadership to identify areas of strengths or weaknesses that exist across the school and develop policy and procedure for improvement. Formative assessment could also provide valuable information in relation to the current school evaluation policies (DES, 2011). For example, information gathered through formative assessment procedures, could monitor school progress and help to identify areas in need of development. This information could then be used to develop priorities for education.

An area of particular interest, within the research, was students' perceptions of the process of assessment. This data was gathered both pre and post intervention and even within a short timeframe, the views of the students had changed quite significantly.

In terms of whole school development and school improvement, we suggest that one area of progression would be to draft whole school policies regarding formative assessment. Such policies would validate the implementation of formative assessment at all class levels and outline practices and procedures appropriate to varying ages and abilities. This could be accompanied by a timeframe for operation to allow for consistency of practice. This would also integrate with current Department of Education and Skills (DES) policy in relation to *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Primary Schools* (2012).

The findings of this action research project strongly indicate that the inclusion of formative assessment practises can have a positive impact on students' academic efficacy and eagerness to learn. Through active participation in AfL, students can be enabled to become more engaged, autonomous and motivated learners. Therefore, we encourage other teachers to formally introduce the processes of AfL within their classrooms. While this is the conclusion of this study, it is a beginning of a bigger endeavour to continue with the

processes of formative assessment and to encourage other practitioners across all levels of education to do likewise.

References

Bennett, R.E. (2011). Formative Assessment: a Critical Review'. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*. 18(1) 5-25.

Bem, D.J. (1972). Self-Perception Theory in L. Berkowitz (Ed.) *Advances in. Experimental Social Psychology*, 6. 1-62.

Black, P., and Wiliam, D. (1998a). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 5 (1) 7-73.

Black, P., and Wiliam, D. (1998b). *Inside the Black Box – Raising standards through Classroom Assessment*. Phi Delta Kappan, 80 (2) 139-144 London, King's College.

Black, P., and Wiliam, D. (2009). Developing the Theory of Formative Assessment. *Educational Assessment Evaluation and Accountability*, 21, 5-31.

British Education Research Association (BERA) (2011). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Nottingham: BERA.

Bruner, J. (1960). *The Process of Education: A Landmark in Educational Theory*. London: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1966). Some Elements of Discovery Thinking. *The Journal of Philosophy for Children*, 3 (1) 26-31.

Carr, W., and Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*. Lewes, Falmer.

Department of Education and Science (1999). *Primary School Curriculum*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (2000). *Learning Support Guidelines*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Skills (2011). *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Skills (2012) *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Primary Schools*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Elder, L., and Paul, R. (2007). Critical Thinking: The Art of Socratic Questioning, Part III. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 31 (3) 34-35.

Elder, L., and Paul, R. (2008). Critical Thinking: Strategies for Improving Student Learning. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 32 (1) 32-33.

Goodrich, H. (1998). Understanding Rubrics. *Educational Leadership*, 54 (4) pp. 14-18.

Harlen, W. (2005). Teachers' Summative Practices and Assessment for Learning – tensions and synergies. *The Curriculum Journal*, 16 (2) 207-223.

Henk, W., and Melnick, S. (1995). The Reader Self-perception Scale (RSPS): A new tool for measuring how children feel about themselves as readers. *The Reading Teacher*, 48 (6) 470-482.

Herman, L., Osmundson, E., and Silver, D. (2010). *Capturing Formative Assessment in Practice: Measurement Challenges.* CRESST Report 770: National Centre for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).

Koshy, V. (2005). *Action Research for Improving Practice: A Practical Guide*. London; Sage Publications.

LeCompte, M., and Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*. San Diego: Academic Press

McNiff, J., and Whitehead, J. (2009). *Doing and Writing Action Research*. London: Sage Publications.

NCCA (2007). *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum – Guidelines for Schools*. Dublin: NCCA.

Nicol, D., and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative Assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31 (2) 199-218.

OECD (2010). *PISA 2009 at a Glance*, Paris: OECD Publishing.

O'Leary, M. (2006). *Towards a Balanced Assessment System for Irish Primary and Secondary Schools*. Oideas, 52.

Pollard, A. (1996). *Reading for Reflective Teaching in the Primary School*. London, Cassell.

Popham, W.J. (2006). *Defining and Enhancing Formative Assessment: AfL Formative Assessment Where it Counts*. University of California, Los Angeles.

Popham, W.J. (2008) *Transformative Assessment*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Ross, J.A. (2006). *The Reliability, Validity and Unity of Self-Assessment*. Practical Assessment Research and Evaluation, 11 (10).

Rudduck, J., and Flutter, J. (2004). *How to Improve your School: Giving pupils a voice.* London: Continuum.

Schunk, D.H. (2004). *Learning Theories: An Educational Perspective*. Upper Saddle River, N.J: Merrill Prentice/Hall.

Scott, J. (2000). Children as Respondents. The Challenge for Quantitative Methods, in Christensen, P., and James, A. (Eds.) *Conducting Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices* (First Edition). New York: Routledge Falmer, 98-119.

Stiggins, R.J. (2001). *Student-involved classroom assessment*, (3rd Edition). Upper Saddle River, N.J; Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Stiggins, R. (2007). *Assessment through the Student's Eyes: Educational Leadership*, 64(8), pp. 22-26.

Stiggins, R., and Popham, W.J. (2008). *Assessing Students' Affect Related to Assessment for Learning: An Introduction for Teachers.* University of California, Los Angeles.

Stringer, E.T. (2007). *Action Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Thompson, S., and Thompson, N. (2008). *The Critically Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Torrence, H., and Pryor, J. (2001). Developing Formative Assessment in the Classroom: Using Action Research to Explore and Modify Theory. *British Education Research Journal*, 27 (5), 615-631.

Wiliam, D., Lee, C., Harrison, C., and Black, P. (2004). Teachers developing assessment for learning: Impact on student achievement. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 11 (1), 49-65.

Wood, M. (2011). *Closer to the Ground: Pupil 'Voice' and the Developments of Knowledge about Schools*. United Kingdom, York St John University.

An evaluation of the utility of homework in Irish primary school classrooms

JOANNE JACKSON AND LORRAINE HARBISON

Abstract

This paper examines the current practice and effectiveness of administering homework in Irish primary schools. The value of homework was explored from three perspectives. A literature review provided the evidence for and the background to administering homework. School policies from a cluster sample of three schools were studied and areas of agreement and discordance identified. A convenience sample of 90 parents was surveyed using a questionnaire based on the literature review findings. The questionnaire contained both single response items on a Likert Scale and free response questions. Responses were documented, data analysed and recommendations proposed. We concluded that it is not the giving of homework per se that is of value but that the type of homework that is administered is more important. Homework that is too difficult; takes too long to complete, or is seen to be inappropriate or of no relevance to the child, may actually have an adverse effect.

Keywords: **homework, parents, home-school communication, supports for learning**

Introduction

Teaching senior infants as a newly qualified teacher is full of rewards and more than a few challenges. One of particular note is the daily preparation and administration of homework which appears to impact substantially on the discretionary time available to me. Rather than settling for continuing with practice on the basis that it is the established norm, I sought to research more widely to ascertain whether giving homework is of value or whether this time could be put to better use to support teaching and learning in my classroom.

In so doing, this research set out to evaluate the utility of homework in the primary school classroom by the following:

- reviewing the literature to establish the theoretical background and empirical evidence for giving homework,
- studying documents on homework developed by state bodies,
- analysing the content of homework school policies,
- obtaining the opinions of a sample of parents through the use of questionnaires, and
- finally, ascertaining the utility of homework through a summation of the data collected.

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

Homework in the primary school

Homework has been a recurrent cause for debate with radically different opinions prevailing from time to time which tended to depict homework as either all good or all bad (Gill and Schlossman, 2000). In the early 20th century, homework was understood to be an important means for aiding knowledge acquisition. Rote memorisation was viewed as a desirable if not essential key skill for children to develop and so tasks were set for homework such as learning spellings, tables or dates off by heart (Cooper, 2001). In contrast to this, medical practitioners in the mid-1990s insisted that it would be more beneficial for children to have free time to play outdoors and argued that initiative and interest in learning were substantially more important than the accumulation of factual knowledge (Bennett and Kalish, 2006). It was against this backdrop that the *Primary School Curriculum* was introduced, a curriculum that prioritises understanding over the rote memorisation of facts (NCCA, 1999, p. 7). However, although not mandatory, and despite changes to the curriculum and innovation in technology, the practice of giving homework remains commonplace throughout our education system and appears to sit quite comfortably with the desire to develop children's metacognitive skills (Rudman, 2014, p.13).

Homework and attainment

And so begs the question, does homework actually raise standards? Cooper et al., (2006) concluded that, "With only rare exceptions, the relationship between the amount of homework students do and their achievement outcomes was found to be positive and statistically significant" (Cooper et al., 2006, p.47). Farrow et al., (1999) cast a shadow over these findings as they note that children who completed homework once a month in the core areas of mathematics, English and science had higher test scores than those who reported doing homework more frequently. This evidence draws into question the ritual daily administration of homework in favour of a weekly based task. Van Voorhis (2004) more specifically states that the younger the child, the less benefit from doing homework on a daily basis. The findings go further to recommend that the nature of homework needs to adapt to suit the age profile of the child with a shift away from repetitive, mundane, independent tasks to interactive assignments that allow a few days for completion (Van Voorhis, 2004, p.207).

Purposes of homework

Although there is little evidence to support the theory that homework actually improves educational performance in the primary school, there are many purposes cited for administering same. These include; developing children's dispositions to learn, fostering self-organisation, supporting independent problem-solving skills, encouraging children to take learning beyond the constraints of the classroom and to see the importance of school work in their own lives (Cooper, 2007).

However, these positive outcomes rely on homework that is appropriate in terms of both quantity and quality. Homework that is lacking in clarity and purpose undermines good attitudes and motivation to achieve. If it takes too long to complete, then this can lead to a loss of interest in the task. Furthermore, large amounts of homework can lead to physical and emotional fatigue (Marzano and Pickering, 2007; Cooper, 2007).

Parental involvement and home school links

One of the more contentious issues in the debate is the extent to which parents should be involved in supporting their child's homework completion (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, p.195). It could possibly be deduced that school work, done at home, somehow acknowledges and recognises the role of parents, and not the teacher, as the primary educator of their child (Government of Ireland, 2004, pp.167-168). This key role that parents play in their child's education is emphasised in both the Primary School Curriculum and more recently, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (NCCA, 1999, p.21; Department of Education and Skills, (DES), 2011, pp.19-26). Although homework is not discussed directly, the strategy states that "The support of parents who are engaged in their child's learning has a significant positive impact on a child's educational achievement, especially in literacy and numeracy" (DES, 2011, p.19).

It is "essential" that there is a close co-operation between the home and school "if children are to receive the maximum benefit from the curriculum" (NCCA, 1999, p.21). Studies have shown that "parental involvement in a child's learning has more of an impact on a child's educational outcomes than social class, level of parental education or income" and can lead to a 15% improvement in children's educational attainment levels (Feinstein and Symons, 1999, cited in National Parents Council (NPCa, p.2; Desforges, 2003).

Involvement in homework can be seen as a facilitator of communication and regular link between home and school. Teachers can use homework to develop a practical partnership with parents and to increase parental appreciation of schooling. It gives parents an opportunity to show an interest in the academic progress of their child and to get involved in their child's learning (NPCb, p.2).

Whereas communication between the home and school is indeed important, homework may not be the best method for forging such links. 'Serious concerns' were raised by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) about the impact of homework both on teaching time and the erosion of quality time between parent and child at home (IPPN, 2010, p.4). The greatest reported drawback of homework for many parents is the strain it places on family life (Kralovec and Buell, 2000). "The burden of too much homework, parents uncertain about how to help, and forgotten assignments" all lead to family tensions (Van Voorhis, 2004). Parental interference coupled with unrealistically high expectations of their child during homework time may cause undue pressure, arguments in the home and a negative impact on the whole family environment (Bennett and Kalish, 2006). Homes become second classrooms in which parents feel required to act as teacher or to police children's homework completion, and children are put under pressure to constantly perform with little or no space left to engage in undirected activity in which they may discover interests that could last a lifetime (Paton, 2010; Marzano and Pickering, 2007).

Homework policies

A very real danger that pervades this debate is that inappropriate homework may even decrease children's educational achievement and as such, "schools should strengthen their policies to ensure that teachers use homework properly" (Marzano and Pickering, 2007, p.76). Whereas there are no official guidelines for schools about homework, they are

recommended to have a policy on the matter. As far back as 1990, the DES, known at the time as the Department of Education and Science, issued a circular which stated that, "Parents should be made aware of the school homework policy and there should be tips and guidelines for parents on how they can assist" (DES, 1990, p.4). Little has changed, as nearly a quarter of a century later, advice on the DES website for parents states that "homework is an important part of learning and it is important to encourage your child to do his or her homework each evening" (Donnelly, 2010).

There is consistency across the literature as to the nature of a good homework policy. Policies should be concise and unambiguous and take into consideration the age of the pupil, the quality and quantity of the work and the time it will take to complete. It is recommended that the learning intention is clearly stated along with the success criteria. The policy should be relevant to the needs of the pupils acknowledging the different cognitive and emotional abilities of children and these differences should be reflected in the purpose, content, frequency and duration of homework tasks. It should also specify the role that children, parents and teachers are expected to play (NPCb.; Cooper, 2007; Van Voorhis, 2004).

Of further importance is that the entire school community, including parents and children, should be consulted in devising the homework policy, a policy that should be clearly communicated to staff, children and parents, particularly at the time of enrolment (New South Wales (NSW), 2013; Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST, 2007). However, a concern to note from the literature reviewed to this point, is the absence of the voice of the teacher, and more importantly, the voice of the child, in the discussion, although homework policies would recommend that children be involved from the outset. Best practice would further suggest that in order to support children's learning, in and out of school, understanding the child's view about homework and their homework behaviours is critical (Hong et al., 2011).

Key participants' understanding of homework

There appears to be an underlying assumption by adults that, "homework is useful for promoting learning without even inquiring into the experience of the learners themselves" (Kohn, 2007, p.3). 'Popular' opinion would hold that "homework is (fundamentally) the job of children", an opinion reiterated by children who liken "the homework process to doing household chores" (Corno and Xu, 2004, p. 227; Marzano and Pickering, 2007, p.74; Van Voorhis, 2004, p.207). For others, it is simply to avoid getting into trouble and to please their teacher or parent (Coutts, 2004, p.184; Warton, 2001, p.161). Therefore, if homework is to be deemed in any way important by children, then it must have some form of intrinsic value (Warton, 2001, p.162). Homework should not be limited to paper and pencil solitary exercises. Instead, homework could offer opportunities than are more learner-driven and more relevant to daily life (Gill and Shlossman, 2000, p.50).

So the challenge for teachers is "to ensure that homework is enjoyed, valued, and not seen as a disliked solitary activity" (Warton, 2001, p.164). However, it is not uncommon for teachers to also dislike homework. Coutts quotes a teacher who goes as far as to say that they 'hate' giving homework, correcting homework and even supervising homework in the capacity as parent (Coutts, 2004, p.183). The reason they give for assigning homework is

that parents judge teachers on how much homework they give. Teachers who give a lot of homework are deemed to be better than those who don't (Coutts, 2004, p.183; Hong et. al., 2011, p.282 and p.284; IPPN, 2010, p.4).

For the most part, the main intention in assigning homework appears to be to foster good work habits in the early years of school with common practice for primary school teachers to assign very small tasks on a regular basis "in order to establish a routine" (Coutts, 2004, p.187). As laudable as this intention is, it does however diminish the value attributed to homework. Homework isn't limited to those occasions when it seems appropriate and important, it has all been decided at the start of the year that the children will have homework to do every night and "later on we'll figure out what to make them do" (Kohn, 2007, p.1).

It is evident from the literature that reform of homework is needed. Whilst homework should remain challenging and rigorous, it needs to be brought in line with the best of progressive pedagogical theory. This means trying to make homework more creative, more experiential, more collaborative, and more oriented to opportunities offered by families, communities, and environments if homework is to be designed with 'enrichment' in mind (Gill and Shlossman, 2000, p.50)

The present study

The present study is limited to analysing in greater depth two key areas of the literature review, that of parents' understanding of the utility of homework in tandem with the analysis of three school homework policy documents. This is a small scale study of 90 completed questionnaires and a review of three school policies. A higher number of questionnaires and school policies analysed may have yielded different results and so may not be generalised to reflect the practices, opinions and attitudes of all parents towards homework in primary schools. A further limitation is the absence of the voice of both children and teachers as this went beyond the scope of this study.

Methodology

The population upon which the survey is focused refers to parents of junior infants to sixth class pupils in a convenience sample of primary schools in a suburb of Dublin. Questionnaires were distributed as they generate data in an efficient manner, and tend to be descriptive and honest (Cohen et al., 2000).

The questions were drafted and pre-tested and amendments were made as required. The questionnaire was then piloted and further adjustments were made. Careful consideration was given during the development, piloting and re-drafting stages of the questionnaire to remove leading and ambiguous questions. Further issues that were taken into consideration included: the costs incurred through photocopying and postage, and the lack of data from non-returned surveys. The questionnaire included questions in both closed and open form. A Likert Scale was used in the questionnaire to determine extent of agreement. As the questions were highly structured in order to elicit the required information, the questionnaire

offered two free response questions at the end which enabled respondents to make additional comments if they wished.

Following a code of ethics ensured that the research had integrity, credibility and confidentiality (Walliman, 2006). The parents were assured that questionnaires completed would be anonymous and confidential. Questionnaire respondents were fully informed regarding the nature of the research and the purpose for which the questionnaires were being carried out. Consent was sought from the respondents to allow their data to be used in the research project.

Interpretation of results

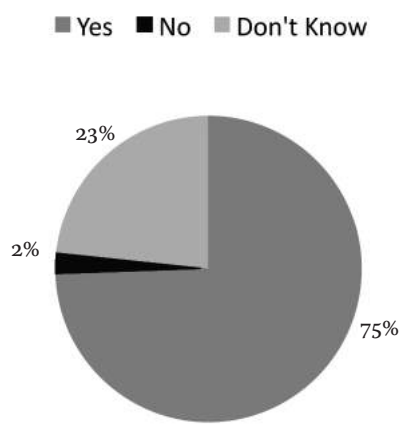
A high response rate of 74% was achieved during this research. According to Fincham (2008) a response rate of approximately 60% should be the goal of researchers. The high response rate of this research may be an indication of the controversial nature and the interest that parents have in the practice of homework.

The results are pulled together under four themes that align with the headings in the literature review. These are: parental awareness of policy, value of homework, parental involvement, and finally, impact at home.

Homework policies

Parents were asked if the school in which their child attended had a homework policy.

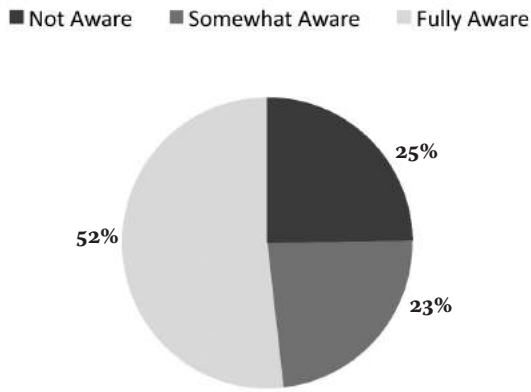
Fig 1: Homework policy



Contrary to best practice as indicated in the literature review, it is evident that not all parents were involved in compiling the school's homework policy as one quarter of the respondents did not know if their school had a policy on homework or not.

Of the 75% of parents who indicated that their child's school had a policy on homework, nearly a third of them were not comfortably familiar with the contents of same.

Fig 2: Awareness of homework policy



A respondent noted that homework "can be stressful if it's not very clear exactly what is to be done – How much help should a parent give?"

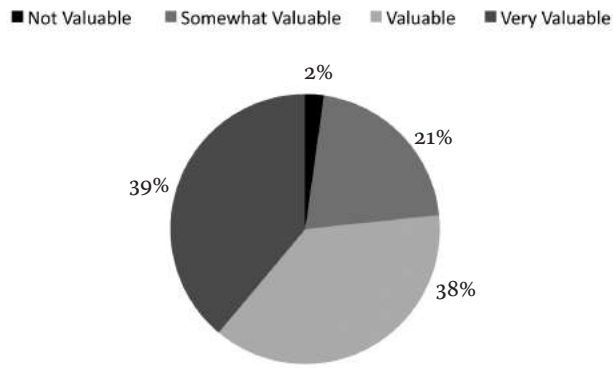
The value of homework

All homework policies studied affirmed the importance of homework at the beginning. Policy one listed two reasons as to why homework is important; "to reinforce what the child learns during the day", and "to provide a link between teacher and parent". Policy two summarised the importance of homework in the following statement. To "consolidate work done in school that day and to provide further practice on certain topics in the curriculum". Policy three listed five reasons why homework is assigned to children. They stated that homework is assigned for the following reasons:

- It allows pupils the opportunity to revisit, revise and consolidate skills learned in class.
- It can help pupils to make more rapid progress in learning.
- It can involve parents and family in the pupil's work, to their mutual benefit.
- It gives pupils an opportunity for independent learning and study.
- It forms a link with the methods of study crucial to success at secondary school and in later life.

Whether or not the respondents were aware of the school's homework policy, there was almost unanimous agreement that homework was valuable with 98% of respondents agreeing that homework had some value, and a substantial percentage viewing homework as 'very valuable'.

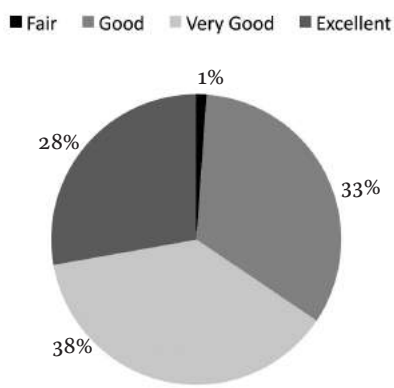
Fig 3: Is homework valuable?



Many respondents wrote about the importance of homework as a form of ensuring parental involvement in their child's learning. "It helps the parents to get involved in the kids' education". Respondents felt more involved as they could see the teaching methods through homework and utilise the same methodology in the home. It "familiarises the parents with the school teaching practice e.g. using phonics so that the parent can use the same method at home".

Many respondents noted the importance of homework as it provides quality time for parents and children to work together. It is "important one to one time with the child" and "It opens up conversation between the child and parent". All except 1% of respondents believed that homework provided a good link between home and school.

Fig 4: Home/school link

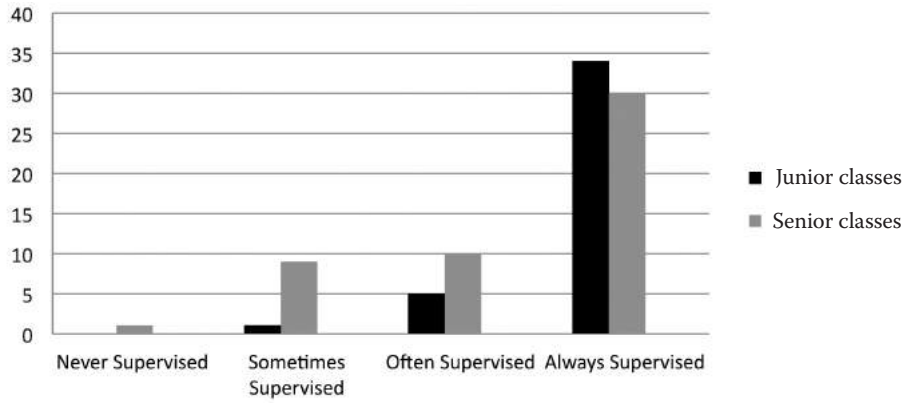


Some respondents wrote about the benefits of homework as a way of identifying their child's weaknesses and strengths. "It gives a good indication on how the student is getting on," "It makes me aware of areas where my child is struggling." Respondents view homework as a means of evaluating their child's ability and to keep tabs on their child's progress. "We believe homework helps parents evaluate what level of aptitude their children have."

Parental involvement

All three homework policies indicated that parents were expected to supervise their child's homework but not to complete the activities for their child. Most parents, 85%, always supervised their children from junior infants to second class. Even at the upper end of the school, 60% of parents consistently monitored their child's homework.

Fig 5: Supervision of homework



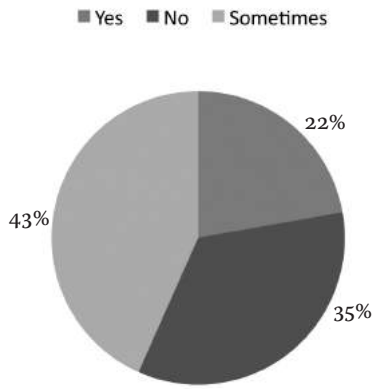
Homework policy three listed six expectations of parents. This school asked parents to support homework by the following:

- providing space and time for their child to do their homework. Turn off the television and radio until the homework is finished,
- checking that the homework is completed and signing the homework journal,
- discussing interesting aspects of the work assigned,
- using the method suggested by the teacher for the learning of spellings,
- regularly checking memorisation of tables,
- informing teachers of problems when they arise.

Homework policy one stated that "parents can play an important role in listening to reading and items to be learned, ensuring that this work is done well". They also outline a homework meeting which is designed to discuss the homework that will be given to their child in that year and what expectations the teacher has for the coming year.

Despite school policy indicating that parents need only act somewhat like bystanders in the homework process, this does not appear to be parents' perception of their role. In fact, 65% of parents revealed that they do not feel in a position to fully support their children with their homework.

Fig 6: Do parents need support?



A respondent noted that there is not "always a clear expectation of what is expected from the child in respect to homework and how stretching it should be".

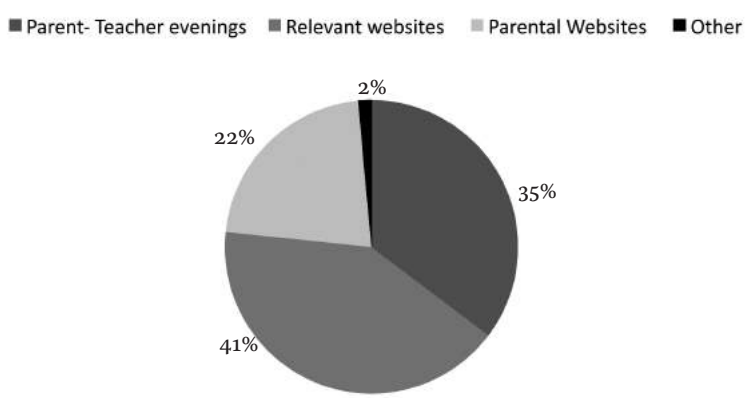
Many respondents voiced their concern about the specific subjects that their children were getting for homework. "I have an issue with Irish homework as I am from the North and have no Irish." Another respondent voiced his concern about maths. "Some of the maths is now being taught a different way to the way the child's parents were taught! A brief workshop or meeting would be of value here."

This was reiterated by another respondent who noted the difficulty they too had with Gaeilge and sometimes maths. "I'd like basic concepts of maths subtraction/addition etc. as teaching methods vary and I get confused with the crossing out, borrow one etc."

Parents feel they have to teach these concepts to children during homework time, however, none of the homework policies expect parents to do this. On the contrary, homework policy one stated that, "It is important that class teachers can see if and where children may need extra help and/or if further explanation in any subject topic is required".

This led to the next question as to how best to support parents to overcome perceived obstacles.

Fig 7: What support is needed?

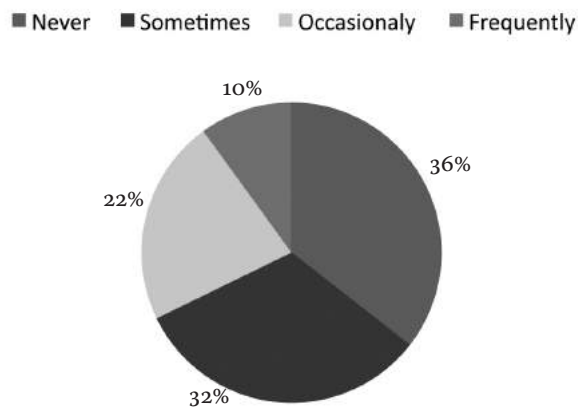


Responses ranged from, "some links on the school webpage to give ideas on how to avoid homework creating arguments at home" to "parent-teacher evenings might help as the teacher knows how the child performs academically and provide advice to the parent on how best to approach the homework so that the child gets the best out of it". One respondent stated that there was no "one size fits all support for parents", and suggested that "the required support could range from meetings with teacher to more specific workshops or website information".

Impact on home life

Perhaps the most shocking statistic that came to the fore from this research was that almost two thirds of parents put forward the view that homework caused some friction at home.

Fig 8: Does homework create upsest between child and parent?



One reason cited for this was that homework was "consistently too difficult for the child". The level of complexity was reiterated by yet another respondent who wrote that homework should be "pitched to be stretching yet achievable" and "an opportunity to challenge children with parental assistance however this is not utilised".

Only homework policy two mentioned any form of differentiated homework. It stated that if parents felt that their child was struggling, they should make an appointment with the class teacher to discuss "potential modifications and strategies to help children complete their homework assignments successfully". None of the other school policies studied mentioned the idea of differentiated homework. What is a shame is that "whilst learning in school (has) apparently become more varied, more differentiated and more imaginative, learning outside of the school (seems) to be stuck in a time warp where the tasks lack a quality of thinking as to the needs of the learner" (Henderson, 2006, cited in Czerniawski and Kidd, 2013, p.7).

The nature of the homework brief also caused tension. "It needs to be of value and not as a completion of workbook exercises". Homework "is often repetitive and task orientated which causes complaint". As such, teachers need to avoid the temptation to make completion

of work begun in the classroom as part of homework, in order to counteract the effects of curriculum overload (Coutts, 2004, p.187; NCCA, 2010).

Perhaps a more common complaint was the duration or length of time spent on homework completion. "They can have an hour of homework which is too much for an eight year old." Following up on the time allocated for homework, two of the homework policy documents studied indicated similar time guidelines outlined as follows:

Junior infants: 10-15 minutes.
Senior infants: 15-20 minutes.
1st and 2nd classes: 20-30 minutes.
3rd and 4th classes: 30-45 minutes.
5th and 6th classes: 45-60 minutes.

When asked about the reasonableness of otherwise of the amount of homework that was set, no respondents indicated that the quantity was unreasonable.

Fig 9: Junior infants to second class

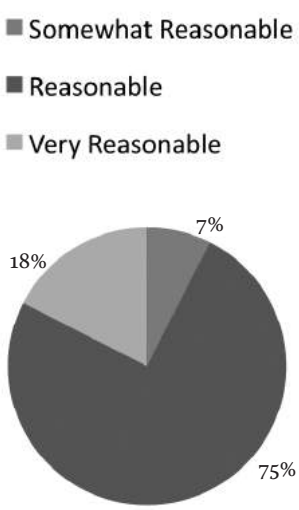
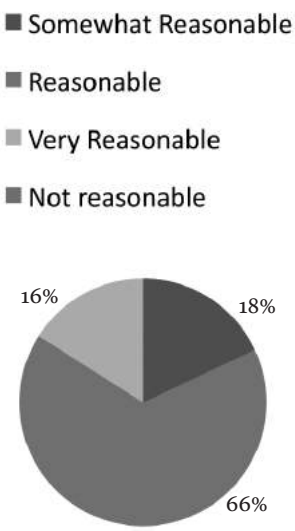


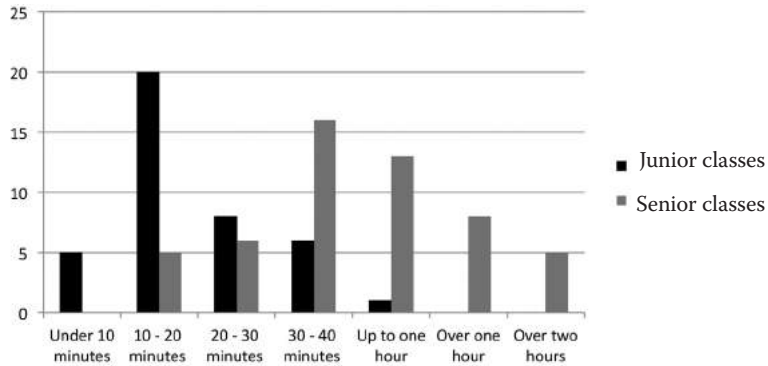
Fig 10: Third to sixth class



However, one respondent commented that although valuable, "it should be short so children can have time to do other activities."

In line with school policy, the majority of children ranging from junior infants to second class finish their homework in ten to 20 minutes extending to 30 or 40 minutes in the middle and senior classes. However, in some cases, it has taken children an inordinate length of time to complete, with nearly 15% of respondents indicating that it can take over one hour and sometimes two hours to complete the quantity of homework assigned to them.

Fig 11: Duration of homework

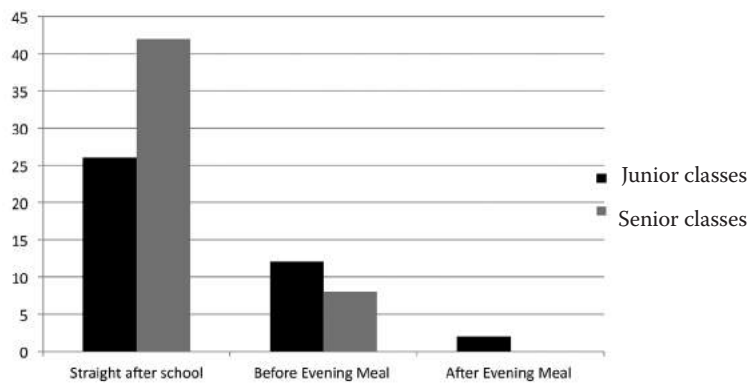


What needs to be considered, therefore, is if parents think that the quantity of homework that their children are getting is reasonable, then why can it take children so long to complete it?

Of concern is that homework is frequently used as a means for both punishing and/or praising children (Czerniawski and Kidd, 2013). All three homework policies analysed state that extra homework will be assigned to children during the week or even at weekends if the teacher deems that the child is not giving due attention and regard to their work. On the other hand, children are rewarded with a night off homework for special efforts made by an individual. Both carrot and stick approaches reinforce an extremely negative viewpoint that homework is something to be endured, rather than valued.

Motivation, therefore, appears to be one of the key factors that can impact negatively on homework completion. Respondents wrote that homework completion can take too long and this caused upset. "When you spend too long on something, the child gets upset and agitated; this is not good for the child or the parent." Some noted that homework is only beneficial when children are motivated and willing to complete it. "On days when the children are willing it creates few problems and gets completed in a reasonable time. However, if tired, it can be like pulling teeth!" Hence, it is not surprising to note that the preference was for children to do homework directly after school to free the children up for the rest of the afternoon.

Fig 12: What time of the day is homework completed?



Discussion

This study sought to evaluate whether the current practice of giving homework in Irish primary schools was of any merit or simply a traditional practice, the effectiveness and value of which has been assumed rather than proven. We hoped to shed some light on the controversy by pulling together the data collected and analyse and compare this to the literature.

Key findings

- The high response rate from the questionnaires could indicate that homework is an issue amongst parents.
- Although school policies were present in every school surveyed, respondents did not think that they were adequately informed, if at all, and were generally unaware of the content of these policies.
- Some parents thought that they were expected to act as experts regarding content or to attempt to teach the content, although this was not the intention identified in any of the school policies analysed.
- The majority of parents agreed that the amount of homework that their child was given was reasonable, although there was less agreement about the nature of the homework tasks assigned and length of time required to complete same.
- The high percentage of parents who stated that homework can cause friction in the family is a concern.
- Teachers should customise the assignment tasks to fit pupils' learning styles and also interests. Homework assignments should be considerate of children's needs; it should be differentiated to ensure success (Vatterott, 2011).
- Homework is only valuable if it benefits children's learning and if, in addition, it supports home school links.
- The efficacy and usefulness of school homework policies is questionable. Perhaps a recommendation that could be drawn from these findings would be to send a relevant and abridged version of the homework policy to all parents.
- Homework must have a clear purpose. It must be efficient showing evidence of valuable learning and good use of time (Vatterott, 2011).
- Homework should promote ownership and have good aesthetic appeal to motivate children (Vatterott, 2011).
- Although consensus in support of homework use has yet to be attained, it remains a pervasive pedagogical strategy in schools (Hong et al., 2011, p.282).

Conclusion

Homework remains a central part of the primary school curriculum that affects teachers and teaching, children and learning, families and home-school communication. Despite this reality, there is limited evidence on the utility of homework. As with the findings of Van Voorhis (2004), too little attention has been given to the purposes of homework and communication between home and school about homework policies. Communication should work both ways, but all the literature refers to home-school communication in

relation to homework rather than what could really be deemed the more appropriate term, school-home!

A number of key themes arose during the questionnaire, namely the lack of knowledge of the expectations of parents, partially due to the homework policy being poorly communicated to parents and the juxtaposition of positive and negative views of homework amongst parents. Even more disappointing, is the absence of the voice of the child in the debate although the curriculum advocates that children should be active agents in their own learning rather than submissive partakers. What is apparent is that radical overhaul of homework needs to take place and it is vital that all involved are given opportunities to voice opinions in order to develop the most effective strategies possible which will maximise children's learning potential.

Bibliography

Anonymous, n/d. *Evaluate Homework*. Retrieved from: http://evaluatehomework.weebly.com/hmwk-policies.html (Accessed 10 June 2013).

Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2000). *Research Methods in Education Fifth Edition*. New York: Routledge Falmer.

Cooper, H. (2007). *The battle over homework: Common ground for Administrators, Teachers and Parents*. California: Corwin Press.

Cooper, H., Robinson, J., and Patall, E.A. (2006). Does Homework Improve Academic Achievement? A Synthesis of Research, 1987-2003. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(1), 1-62.

Cooper, H. (2001). Homework for All – in Moderation. *Educational Leadership*, 58(7), 34-38.

Corno, L., and Xu, J. (2004). Homework as the job of childhood. *Theory into Practice*, 43(3), 227-233.

Coutts, P.M. (2004). Meanings of Homework and Implications for Practice. *Theory into Practice*, 43(3), 182-188.

Czerniawski, G., and Kidd, W. (2013). *Homework for Learning: 300 Practical Strategies*. UK: Open University Press.

DES (1990). Circular letter 20/90. Retrieved from: www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/pc20_90.pdf (Accessed 12 June 2013).

DES (2011). *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among children and young people 2011-2020*. Dublin: DES.

Desforges, C., and Abouchaar, A. (2003). *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review*. UK: DfES Publications.

Donnelly, K. (2010). *Primary School Homework of No Real Benefit, Says Principals*. Retrieved from: www.independent.ie/lifestyle/education/primary-school-homework-of-no-real-benefit-say-principals-26688001.html (Accessed 15 February 2013).

Farrow, S., Tymms, P., and Henderson, B. (1999). Homework and Attainment in Primary Schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 25 (3), 323-341.

Fincham, J.E. (2008). *Response Rates and Responsiveness for Surveys, Standards and the Journal*. Retrieved from: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2384218/ (Accessed 12 June 13).

Gill, B., and Schlossman, S. (2000). The Lost Cause of Homework Reform. *Americal Journal of Education*, 109(1), 27–62.

Government of Ireland (2012). *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, 166-167. Dublin: Government Publications.

Hong, E., Wan, M., and Peng, Y. (2011). Discrepencies between Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Homework. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 22(2), 280-308.

IPPN (2010). *Submission on Curriculum Reform*. Dublin: The Joint Oireachtas Committee for Education.

Kalish, N., and Bennett, S. (2007). *The case against homework: How homework is hurting our children and what we can do about it*. Chicago: Three Rivers Press.

Kralovec, E., and Buell, J. (2000). *The End of Homework: How homework disrupts families, overburdens children, and limits learning*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Kohn, A. (2007). *Rethinking Homework*. Retrieved from: www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/rethinkinghomework.htm (Accessed 12 June 2014).

Marzano, R.J., and Pickering, D.J. (2007). The Case For and Against Homework. *Educational Leadership*, 64, 74–79.

National Adult Literacy Agency (2013). *Help My Kid Learn*. Retrieved from: www.helpmykidlearn.ie/ (Accessed 18 June 2013).

NCCA (1999). *Primary School Curriculum Introduction*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

NCCA (2010). *Curriculum Overload in Primary Schools. An overview of national and international experiences*. Retrieved from: www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Primary_School_Curriculum/PSN_Curriculum_Overload/Overview_national_international_experiences.pdf (Accessed 12 June 2014).

NPC (a). *Getting Involved in Your Child's Education: The Why and How of 'Parental Involvement'*. Retrieved from: www.npc.ie/attachments/21196d07-39c1-40c6-9600-395fe20c3774.PDF (Accessed 4 June 2014).

NPC (b). *Homework*. Retrieved from: www.npc.ie/attachments/3b19a148-cddc-4d73-8185-90419641423a.PDF (Accessed 4 June 2014).

NSW (2013). *Curriculum and Learning Innovation Centre – Homework and the Curriculum State of New South Wales*. Retrieved from: www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/homework/index.htm (Accessed 18 June 2013).

PDST (2007). Homework Policy. Retrieved from: http://ppds_en.educast.ie/index.php?option=com_contentandtask=view&id=101&Itemid=187 (Accessed 12 March 2013).

Rudman, N.P.C. (2014). A review of homework literature as a precursor to practitioner-led doctoral research in a primary school. *Research in Education*, 91, 12-26.

Van Voorhis, F.L. (2004). Reflecting on the Homework Ritual: Assignments and Designs. *Theory into Practice*, 43 (3), 205-212.

Warton, P.L. (2001). The Forgotten Voices in Homework: Views of Students. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(3), 155-165.

Hoover-Demspey, K.V., Battiato, A.C., Walker, J.M.T., Reed, R.P., DeJong, J.M., and Jones, K.P. (2001). Parental Involvement in Homework. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(3), 195-209.

The challenges, dilemmas and opportunities associated with implementing inclusion in an Irish primary school: the school stakeholders' perspective

CONOR MULCAHY

Abstract

This paper is a small scale examination of the realities of implementing Inclusion in a rural primary school in 21st century Ireland. The understanding of the key school stakeholders of inclusion as a concept as well as their experiences including children with special education needs is explored through a series of interviews. The data is examined in relation to a review of some of the relevant literature associated with the subject of inclusion and the education of children with special education needs from the leadership, mainstream teaching and special needs assistant perspectives.

Keywords: **inclusion, understanding, stakeholder, attitudes, planning**

Context of paper

Over the past few years there has been a large increase in the inclusion of children with special education needs (SEN) in mainstream primary schools across Ireland. This has been a time of upheaval and changing attitudes amongst stakeholders involved in educating these children. Now more than ever, education staff are facing up to the dilemmas that come with inclusion and turning everyday challenges that occur into opportunities to enrich the learning for all pupils and improve training and expertise of all staff. In this project I wanted to examine some of these challenges, dilemmas and opportunities that exist in this era of inclusion from the perspectives of special needs assistants (SNAs), teachers and school management. I focused my study on a small school in the aftermath of a very contentious period following the arrival of two children with very challenging emotional/behavioural difficulties. I wanted to see if there was any evidence that the experience of this challenging period caused a change in attitudes among the staff in the school. Within the context of the school I wanted to try and get a sense of some of the challenges and dilemmas that the staff had to navigate and see if any opportunities presented themselves along the way.

The first thing I did was read a selection of the literature available on the SNA, teacher and management perspectives regarding inclusion. This gave me a good sense of how

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

inclusion as a concept has really gained traction over the past few years and how there is a large volume of work available from all of the different perspectives this project focuses on.

For the data I needed to analyse, I asked the management, teachers and SNAs in the school the same questions but I asked them to consider their own particular perspective when answering the questions. I wanted to know what their understanding of inclusion as a concept was. Did they believe that every child could be educated in a mainstream class? Had their attitudes towards inclusion changed in the past two years or because of their experiences with particular children? Could they detail any particular successes they may have had including a child with SEN in the school? Finally, did they have any thoughts on what was needed to be done to improve inclusive practices in the school into the future.

Inclusion in the primary school: a brief examination of the literature

Teacher perspective

In her paper studying decision making in special education meetings, Rogers (2002) describes the processes that occur when school staff, parents, and professionals come together to plan for the inclusion of children with special education needs. She discovered that teachers tended to choose the narratives that best suited them at the time within their own institutional constraints. De Boer (2011) recognises the key role that teachers play in inclusive education and how the successful implementation of inclusive practices in schools relies heavily on positive attitudes from teachers. In her review of 26 studies regarding teacher attitudes to inclusion, she identifies issues relating to a lack of experience with children with SEN and a lack of specific training for types of disabilities encountered.

Regarding the preparing of teachers for inclusive education, Florian and Linklater (2010) make the point that the question is not what the teachers need to know or if they have sufficient knowledge to work in inclusive classrooms, but how best can they make use of what they already know to help learners experiencing difficulties. This 'inclusive pedagogy' extends the routine classroom activities and life to cater for all needs. They speak of the "new way of thinking about teaching", taking the challenges associated with teaching children with SEN and turning them into learning experiences for all.

Shevlin et al (2012) looked at the opportunities and challenges associated with the development of inclusive practices in the Republic of Ireland. They identified the doubts teachers have about the appropriateness of inclusion for children with SEN depended greatly on the severity of their disability or specific education need. The concerns teachers have about time constraints, lack of supports and insufficient resources are highlighted. The lack of sufficient training is underpinned here. Challenges also include teachers having old fashioned and incorrect perceptions of a child's behavior and failing to understand that the behaviour exhibited can often be the only way a child with special needs can communicate their needs.

The special needs assistant perspective

Rose and O'Neill (2009) detail the important role played by teaching assistants (TAs) and special needs assistants (SNAs) in the implementation of inclusive practices in Britain and

Ireland. Both countries have committed to inclusion throughout their respective education systems although the roles of the TA and SNA differ sharply. The TAs have assumed a pedagogical role within their own right, while in Ireland the role of the SNA is predominantly one of caring for a specific child. However, they point out that no definitive model for effective adult support deployment in classrooms has yet to be identified.

O'Neill in Rose (2010), notes that a lack of clarity about the role of adult support in classrooms can be a barrier to inclusion. This confusion about the role and lack of sufficient training has led to negative consequences for the students who are being supported. She stresses that while SNAs have an important role in effective inclusion, they are not intended as substitutes for trained class or special education teachers. However, there is merit in broadening the role of the SNA with increased training. SNAs themselves acknowledge the importance of developing skills to help break down barriers to inclusion and are aware of how new skills enhance and clarify their role.

In their study of the role of TAs in schools, Webster et al (2010) found that a teaching assistant's pedagogical role can sometimes be detrimental to the child with SEN. They argue that the TA's role needs to be refocused. If the pedagogical aspect of it is to be maintained, it needs to be better defined and utilised. They don't rule out TAs reverting to a caring, non-pedagogical role where the school would decide how best to utilise them.

Webster et al (2011) look a bit closer at the pedagogical role TAs play and the controversy that surrounds their deployment. They conclude that while there are definitely issues involved with this role, the TAs are not to blame and it is the system that needs changing.

In their report on the SNA scheme, the Department of Education and Skills (2011) examines closely the role of the SNA in Irish classrooms. They conclude that the role of the SNA has expanded beyond what was intended, and in some cases, there is a pedagogical element to their current role. They express concern at the incorrect or ineffective deployment of SNAs for children who aren't entitled to them or in clerical or secretarial roles. There is an interesting observation made that SNAs, in some cases, are being used to 'contain' behaviour instead of appropriate planning being in place for the child drawn up by teachers and supported by professionals.

The school leadership perspective

An early view on the dilemmas facing principals and management is described in Meegan and MacPhail (2006) when they talk about there being no easy answer to the pressures on schools to include children with special educational needs (SEN). They describe the 'fear' principals and teachers have when facing unfamiliar situations and needs.

Flatman Watson (2009) carried out a more focused examination of the realities facing leaders of schools implementing inclusive practice. Principals of primary schools in counties Dublin and Kildare (245 in total), who were part of the data gathering for the report, identified difficulties getting appropriate and sufficient access to resources. There is a perception that the Department of Education and Skills is dragging its heels. This perceived lack of support is leading to issues regarding enrolment where specific needs of pupils can be met within the schools 'current provision'. Schools are being left with no option but to refuse admission to pupils where resources and supports can't be provided. This has led to a

reduction in opportunities for inclusion. The principals in the study also cite a lack of expertise in their staff compounded by a lack of new training.

Ferguson (2010) notes the challenge facing schools of making inclusive practices available to "everyone, everywhere and all of the time". Citing Law and Wenger (1991) she discusses school leadership facilitating communities of practice or professional learning communities where teachers learn from one another in an ongoing way through working together to teach and improve their practice. She shows the opportunities of inclusion for schools when she describes how increased complexity of schooling has forced teachers out of the classroom to work together to navigate inclusion.

Rose (2010) points out the critical role played by school leadership in ensuring good inclusive practice in the school setting. Citing Dipaula and Walther-Thomas (2003) he establishes how the school leader's credibility is bolstered by operationalising inclusive attitudes with practical actions. The emphasis is very much on the leadership providing support structures for teachers and pupils.

This leadership support role is echoed in Thompson (2012) when he talks about the importance of developing an appreciation and understanding of evidence based inclusive practices that are supported by head teachers, governors and research bodies. He broadens his vision of leadership and inclusion when he describes the importance of inclusion being part of any school leadership agenda to ensure that it is fully embraced by the school. For a school to become more inclusive, head teachers, staff and governing bodies must show enthusiasm for inclusion.

In their paper on teachers' perceptions of inclusion, Shevlin et al (2012) researched a small number (7) but with a wide variety of schools from urban to rural, mixed to single gender and differing socio economic backgrounds. Among some of their findings was an interesting point made by a principal who mentioned that they believed that inclusion must be based on child centrality and that the school's ethos would dictate if the child with SEN feels part of the learning environment. However, a clear issue that is highlighted is the 'guilt' felt by principals. There is much agreement that no matter what is done there is always the feeling that schools are not doing enough for children with SEN.

Methedology

My project is an interpretive study. To gather the data that I needed for this study I decided that the semi-structured interview would give me the qualitative data that I was looking for. Walliman (2005) describes the interview as a flexible tool with a wide range of applications and is suitable for quantitative data but particularly useful when qualitative data is required. It is this usefulness that makes the interview the ideal data-gathering process for me in this case. Bell (2010), citing Selltiz (1962), warns of some issues with the interview when she points out that interviewers are human beings and not machines and their manner may have an effect on the respondents. This was important for me to consider as I knew the respondents so I was conscious of just asking the questions and avoiding influencing their answers in any way.

The school that I did my research in is a mixed primary school. There are approximately 150 children, nine teachers, four SNAs and an administrative principal. I thought carefully about who I would ask to be interviewed so as to get the most useful data. I decided to interview the principal and deputy principal representing the management perspective. I interviewed teachers who had recent experience with two children with significant behavioural issues. I also interviewed the two SNAs assigned to these two children. I conducted each interview after school on consecutive days, in my classroom with the door closed. Each interview lasted approximately seven to eight minutes and, with the permission of each staff member, I recorded each interview with a dictaphone to help my accuracy when analysing their answers. I asked each interviewee the same five questions but asked them to consider their own perspective when answering.

Before I began the interviews I approached the principal and secured permission to conduct this research in the school, subject to anonymity for staff and school insofar as was practical.

Findings and analysis

What is your understanding of inclusion in the primary school context?

Both SNAs have a clear view of what inclusion means to them. They both speak about fully accepting children with SEN in to the school community. SNA A goes further: "It's important that the child with SEN be given the same opportunity to be educated as any other pupil".

These opportunities for inclusion are what Flatman and Watson (2009) spoke about as being at risk with the reduction in resources and Department of Education and Skills failure to provide support. SNA B speaks about the effects of inclusion on the child: "Inclusion lets the child with SEN become more independent which increases their self-esteem".

This focus on the needs of the child is the 'child centrality' described by Shevlin et al (2012). Both teachers understood at a basic level that inclusion was about bringing children of all abilities together in the classroom, Teacher A: "Making sure everyone is cared for and included". Teacher B: "It means to include all children regardless of their specific education needs..." They are acknowledging their role educating children of all abilities as Florian (2008) described. Teacher B makes an interesting point when he adds, "...where possible, in a mainstream class". This 'where possible' comment indicates that he feels that there are instances, as Shevlin et al (2012) illustrates, where he believes that full inclusion isn't always appropriate.

Can every child be educated in a mainstream classroom?

The SNA opinions differ a little on this question. SNA B feels that all children can and should be educated in a mainstream setting: "I feel each child has a right to be educated in a mainstream setting". SNA A, however, wasn't so sure. She felt the question didn't have a simple answer: "It really depends on each case and what specific need they have".

SNA A shows an understanding of what Ferguson (2010) spoke of when he described the increased complexity of education with inclusion. Both SNAs agree that availability of resources is key to effective inclusion. This is in line with Flatman and Watson (2009). SNA

A: "If the needs of the child with SEN aren't being met then how can a mainstream class be the right option?"

The teachers had strong views on this question. They both felt that all children could be educated in a mainstream classroom. However, teacher B felt that a scarcity of sufficient supports and resources meant that some children shouldn't be educated in a mainstream classroom. "Some children with severe special needs would require lots of supports. Without these in place, it mightn't be possible." This statement once more echoes Shevlin et al (2012) in underling the importance of resources. Teacher A spoke about the importance of re-educating teachers: "More and more children are coming to school with autism and other needs and we just don't have the tools to deal with them, teachers need to be re-educated". This understanding of the need for re-educating teachers is central to De Boer's (2011) belief that training is needed to change attitudes. However, it does not run in line with Florian and Linklater's (2010) arguement when they talk about teachers making use of what they already know.

The principal believes that pupils with SEN can be included, but not without the proper resources in place: "It isn't about wishing or wanting them to be included, it's about if the school has the ability and resources to ensure the particular child can engage with the curriculum in some way and integrate with the rest of the school community." This is what Ferguson (2010) notes is the difficulty faced by schools implementing inclusion for everyone, everywhere, all the time. This issue about resources was highlighted in Flatman and Watson's report.

Have your attitudes to inclusion changed over the past two years or due to your experiences with any specific child?

SNA A's attitude has changed. She found the child she was working with so difficult and disruptive initially that she despaired. They worked hard until they found strategies that worked: "His 'choice' cards and visual timetable have changed everything really, they have helped us to manage his behaviour and they allow him to take part in lessons with the rest of the class". Learning new skills has led her to be more comfortable working with the child. However, this professional development is not readily available or encouraged by the Department of Education and Skills (2011). SNA B's attitude doesn't appear to have changed as much: "Once the correct structure is in place, the children can thrive in a warm supportive environment."

It is interesting to see the contrasting views held here. I feel that SNA A is anxious to improve and develop her practice in the model of the TA in the UK and SNA B seems to be content in the caring supporting role envisaged by the Department of Education and Skills (2011). Both SNAs are comfortable in their differing visions of the role of the SNA. The lack of clarity about the role of the SNA in the Irish education system and the lack of CPD means the adult supports aren't being utilised as well as they could be as described by O'Neill cited in Rose (2010). The two teachers felt that their attitudes had changed somewhat. Teacher A, in particular, felt very strongly about it: "I have a child with severe ADHD in my class. I used to look at him last year and worry about how I was going to deal with him. I was convinced

that he shouldn't really be in a mainstream school. Having now taught him I realise that we, as teachers, are the ones that need to change to accommodate all needs".

Her former attitude that the child shouldn't be in a mainstream school is similar to Rogers (2002) talking about teachers choosing the narrative that best suited their situation. In this case she was unsure of her ability to teach the child, therefore, the child shouldn't be in a mainstream school. Her change in attitude, however, goes along with Florian (2008) when she describes how individual teachers can change how they work in their own classrooms.

The deputy principal's attitude hasn't changed. She has worked in the resource room for several years so she is comfortable working with children with SEN. "I wouldn't say my attitude has changed. These children need to be educated like all children do. I just try to set an example of inclusion for the rest of the staff and children to see." Her attitude is a very positive one and it runs along with Rose (2010) citing Dipaula and Walther-Thomas (2003) describing how school leaders' credibility is bolstered by their promotion of inclusive practices through practical actions.

Have you had any particular successes including children with SEN in the school community?

The two SNAs spoke about successes. SNA A spoke in general terms: "Thankfully, when we got the right structures and supports in place the year has worked out very successfully." She had spent the first number of weeks 'containing' the child's behaviour by taking the child out of the class regularly and removing the child from classroom activities that set off disruptive behaviour as per Department of Education and Skills (2011). This brought about very little change or improvement in the child's behaviour and led to the child falling behind in class work. She found that the situation improved immeasurably once the teacher had put the necessary structures and plans in place. SNA B was more specific when describing the successes she had: "I've worked with a child with SEN who loved Lego. I got a group of four of his classmates to play with him. It was very rewarding watching them chatting and laughing and sharing ideas."

SNA B's actions seemed to encapsulate the SNA situation in Ireland. Organising a simple group work activity to foster inclusion within the classroom she was working in, while useful and helpful, is outside the remit of the SNA as it is pedagogical in nature (DES, 2011). The successful outcome would indicate that the SNA role could and should be expanded as Webster (2010) describes for the TA in Britain although not forgetting that as O'Neill, cited in Rose (2010) stated, SNAs are not sufficient substitutes for teachers.

The teachers viewed the successes they had in terms of the children with SEN in their classrooms taking part in day to day lessons. Teacher B explained: "Having pupil A be part of the class is a success in itself. Anytime he takes part in a group activity or completes some maths work is what I would consider a success." Teacher B understands the importance of teachers managing their expectations of what a successful outcome is. He looked at where the child was and the progression he was making. He then planned according to the child's need and not the curriculum. He didn't feel any of the 'guilt' described by Shevlin et al (2012) that the child wasn't completing curricular targets. Teacher C considered her own change in attitude and improved skills as a success for inclusion. She had been so anxious prior to

this year that her ability to adapt to the child's needs had given her an enormous sense of satisfaction as described by Florian and Linklater (2010).

The principal spoke about the successes of enrolling children with behavioural issues in the face of opposition from some staff: "It was a really difficult time getting the staff to come around to accepting these children. They simply didn't accept that it was our job to deal with these children. Thankfully the two teachers managed beautifully and the voices of opposition have died down."

These are the unfamiliar situations and needs that are faced by schools as mentioned by Meegan and MacPhail (2006). They also mention how there are no simple answers and this is very much the case in this situation.

What needs to be done in the future to ensure good inclusive practices in the school?

The SNAs had conflicting views on what the priorities needed to be for the future. SNA A sees training for staff as the way forward: "I think all members of staff should undergo a certain amount of training regarding children with SEN. This would help our understanding of the needs and abilities of these children." This grasp of the need for training is laudable but, however, it goes against the DES (2011) vision for the role of the SNA. This eagerness for CPD is more in line with the role of the TA in Britain where the CPD path is much clearer, as pointed out in Rose and O'Neill (2009).

SNA B's recommendations for the future are more broadly based: "I think that all staff need to be more aware of the needs of all of the children in the school not just the ones in their classroom. They need to be more positive about teaching children with SEN." This is what Thompson (2012) spoke of when he talked about the need for the school to embrace inclusion.

The teachers felt that the number one priority was re-education and up skilling for the school staff. Teacher A suggested the Croke Park hour be used to bring experts in to give talks to the staff relating to the special needs found in the school. Both teachers had concerns about how senior staff in the school would react if courses were imposed upon them. Teacher D expressed concerns that whole school training mightn't suit all members of staff as the subject of inclusiveness for all was still a divisive topic in the school – as it is in many schools. This is contrary to Wenger (1991) describing "communities of practice", with teachers coming together to learn. The resistance of some members could be due to many reasons from strong beliefs about the appropriateness of integrating children with special needs to the "fear of the unfamiliar situation and needs of inclusion" as described by Meegan and MacPhail (2006).

The leadership view was very much in line with the teachers' views on the need for staff to change their practices. The deputy principal made an interesting point: "All staff need to take responsibility for the children with SEN in their class. It is not just up to the resource teacher to teach these children. They need to let go of the idea that they are there to teach the very able. Those days are gone." She is anxious for a 'community of practice' type atmosphere in the school as described in Ferguson (2010) citing Lave and Wenger (1991). She is worried that children with SEN aren't fully welcomed by all staff into the school community as mentioned in Shevlin et al (2012). The principal was concerned with the direction the

school would have to take in the light of the Department of Education and Skill's reduction in SNA provision and resource hours and the effect this would have on enrolment: "It has got to the point that the resources just aren't there to meet the needs of every child out there. We will have to seriously consider refusing admission to children with specific needs if the appropriate resources can't be put in place."

These issues are what Flatman Watson (2009) spoke about where the Department of Education and Skills dragging its heels would lead to reductions in opportunities for inclusion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to look again at some of the challenges, dilemmas and opportunities associated with inclusion that I have discovered in my study of this primary school. I feel that attitudes and practices are changing. The greatest challenge I could see was getting teachers to buy into inclusion. Though hardly a new concept, there is much evidence of the difficulty changing ingrained attitudes amongst staff and this could be a problem in schools where some staff may feel that teaching children with SEN is somebody else's problem.

I examined the dilemma of how best to utilise adult supports in the classroom. There is much in the literature about how SNAs are under used compared to TAs in Britain. The Department of Education and Skills has a very clear idea of the role they envisage for the SNA and that is one of a carer without any of the pedagogical role of the TA. This lack of a developmental path has led to frustration amongst SNAs and this is clear from my interviews where there is an appetite for development as well as some evidence of minor pedagogical work with successful outcomes. The further dilemma of trying to implement inclusive practices in environments where adequate resources and supports are scarce is one that school leadership is grappling with. It has become so difficult that in the case of the principal that I interviewed, she was considering refusing enrolment to future children with SEN on the grounds that the supports just aren't there to meet their needs.

I was able to identify several instances of opportunities that have arisen from this new inclusive environment in schools. From my interviews I discovered the appetite for developing skills and re-education was there. Teachers recognised that they needed to be trained to educate children of all needs. This training could enrich the education experience for all and make teachers into better teachers. Inclusion has also given schools the opportunity to grow together and enhance the school community as they embrace children of all needs in their ethos and practice.

References

De Boer, A.A., Pijl, S.J., and Minnaert, A.E.M.G (2011). Regular primary schoolteachers' attitudes towards inclusive education: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(3): 331-353.

Department of Education and Skills (2011). *The Special Needs Assistant Scheme: A Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistants Scheme 2007/8-2010*. Dublin: DES.

Di Paola, M., and Walther-Thomas, C. (2003). *Principals and Special Education: The Critical Role of School Leaders*. University of Florida: Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education.

Ferguson, D. (2008). International trends in inclusive education: the continuing challenge to teach each one and everyone. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(2)109-120.

Flatman Watson, S. (2009). Barriers to inclusive education in Ireland: the case for pupils with a diagnosis of intellectual and/or pervasive developmental disabilities. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37(7) 280-282.

Florian, L. (2008). Special or inclusive education, future trends. *British Journal of Special Education*, 35(4) 202–208.

Florian, L., and Linklater, H. (2010). Preparing teachers for inclusive education: using inclusive pedagogy to enhance teaching and learning for all. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 40(4) 369-386.

Lave, D., and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press.

Meegan, S., and MacPhail, A. (2006). Inclusive education: Ireland's education provision for children with special educational needs. *Irish Educational Studies*, 25(1) 53 -62.

Rogers, R. (2002). Through the eyes of the institution: A critical discourse analysis of decision making in two special education meetings. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 33(2) 213-237.

Rose, R. (2010). *Confronting Obstacles to Inclusion, International Responses to Developing Inclusive Education*. London: Routledge.

Rose, R., and O'Neill, A. (2009). Classroom support for inclusion in England and Ireland: an evaluation of contrasting models. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 4(3) 250-261.

Shevlin, M., Winter, E., and Flynn, P. (2012). Developing inclusive practice: teacher perceptions of opportunities and constraints in the Republic of Ireland. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17 (10) 1119-1133.

Thompson, D. (2012). Whole School Development: Inclusion and Special Education Needs. In J. Cornwall and L. Graham (Eds) *Leading on Inclusion Dilemmas, Debates and a new perspective* (p 54). Routledge.

Webster, R., Blatchford, P., Basset, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., and Russell, A. (2010). Double standards and first principles: framing teaching assistant support for pupils with special educational needs. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 25(4) 319-336.

Webster, R., Blatchford, P., Basset, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., and Russell, A. (2011). The wider pedagogical role of teaching assistants. *School Leadership and Management*, 31(1) 3-20

Nationalism, prejudice and intercultural education

ANNE HORAN

Abstract

The demographic pattern of Ireland in the early 21st century is far removed from that of the mid 20th century. Ireland has become a multicultural/multiracial society. Ethnic diversity is now the norm in our towns, cities, and in rural communities.

Nationalism as a concept will be examined. While mentioning Rousseau and political nationalism, I will concentrate on Herder and the concepts of cultural nationalism and cultural pluralism, and their relevance to Ireland in the early 21st century. Nones (2008) and Kellas (1991) refer to a form of nationalism which leads to prejudice and distrust of newcomers. In Ireland today this is demonstrated in attitudes and behaviour shown to the immigrant families who have changed the cultural make-up of Ireland in recent years. The impact of intercultural education in Irish primary schools will be considered.

Keywords: **ethnic diversity, prejudice, distrust, cultural nationalism, intercultural education.**

Introduction

The demographic pattern of Ireland in the early 21st century is far removed from that of the mid 20th century. Ireland has become a multicultural/multiracial society. Ethnic diversity is now the norm in our towns, cities, and in rural communities. There is evidence of a lack of integration of newcomer children and their families into school communities (Devine, 2008). This paper aims to explore some of the background to this lack of integration and, while doing so, will examine initiatives in primary education which aimed to address interculturalism and intercultural education in Ireland. Nationalism as a concept will be examined. While mentioning Rousseau and political nationalism, I will concentrate on Herder and the concepts of cultural nationalism and cultural pluralism. I will argue that these expressions of nationalism are of relevance to Ireland in the 21st century. Guidelines in place since 1995 have not stemmed the tide of discrimination against many immigrant peoples. Will the *Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015* succeed where other guidelines have failed?

Changing educational landscape in Ireland

Ireland has undergone many changes since the middle of the 20th century. Ireland's economic boom, the years of the Celtic Tiger, began in or around 2000 with Ireland seeing a large

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

increase in investment from abroad, the lowest corporate tax rate in the OECD, a young well educated workforce and a level of social partnership and infrastructure investment which was supported by the European Union (Sweeney, 1999). Unemployment levels fell. Indeed Ireland saw an increase in employment, which grew by 77% between 1993 and 2007 (OECD, 2009). Ireland became a member of the Eurozone. The European Union itself saw an expansion in May 2004 and migrant labour became a feature of the EU. Ireland had low levels of personal income tax and an educational system which was highly regarded internationally. Thus, Ireland was now an attractive country in which to live, work and raise a family. The years 2002-2006 saw a large increase in immigration to Ireland. By 2007 the immigrant population was approximately 11% of the total population, an increase of 60% in ten years. It is no surprise that the 2006 census showed 188 nationalities living in Ireland, with the country now having a total immigrant population of 420,000 (CSO, 2006).

A country whose previous demographic patterns were characterised by large scale emigration, from 2004 became a favoured destination for immigrants seeking a better life. Many of these economic migrants came to Ireland with their families, and this brought about the emergence of a new group of children into Irish primary schools, newcomer children. The *OECD Review of Migrant Education* estimated that in 2009 about 10% of students in primary schools had nationalities other than Irish (OECD, 2009).

Educational policy: a response to diversity.

The Irish education system now faced new challenges. There were a large number of newcomer children attending Irish primary schools, with varied levels of linguistic needs and abilities. These children began to attend mainstream schools, being educated alongside children for whom English was their first language. Language and learning needs were quickly identified. Language acquisition became one of the more immediate aspects of intercultural education. The DES has provided support for children who do not have English as their first language by the provision of English language support teaching, and have directed that newcomer children are entitled to this support for two years. This enables the development of conversational English. However, it is acknowledged that the development of academic English requires a five year period of instruction, (Cummins, 2011). The withdrawal of this support at a time when linguistic ability is still developing leaves many children struggling to survive in the classroom.

Policy initiative in the area of aiding language acquisition was supported financially by the Department of Education and Science (DES). Resources were made available to help schools at this time. Guidelines on intercultural education in the primary school issued from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2005). With the aim of advising schools in policy development and planning the guidelines explore approaches and methodologies which are suitable for intercultural education, including *Toolkit for Diversity in the Primary School* (2007), *Up and Away*, IILT (2006). DES circulars 53/07 and 15/09 were issued.

Seen as relevant to all children, not only those newly arrived in Ireland, intercultural education is defined by the NCCA (2005) as follows: "education which respects, celebrates

and recognises the normality of diversity in all areas of human life. It sensitises the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life encircles all of us" (NCCA, 2005, p.3). "It is education which promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination and promotes the value upon which equality is built" (NCCA 2005, p.3).

These principles are relevant to all children in Irish primary schools, and have long been recognised as such. The *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) is regarded as being an intercultural curriculum, and provides aims which support intercultural education. For all children, intercultural education sets out to provide knowledge, understanding, attitudes and values. It is integrated with all subjects and with the general life of the school, and should provide the child with a 'real world' focus. Language is recognised as central to the development of intercultural competencies. The NCCA guidelines document, a response to the changing population in primary schools, embraces the aims of this earlier curriculum and expresses the need to form "a school culture that is welcoming, respectful and sensitive to the needs of all children" (NCCA, 2005, p.6). The aims of the guidelines are stated as follows: "to contribute to the development of Ireland as an intercultural society based on a shared sense that language, culture and ethnic diversity is valuable" (NCCA, 2005, p.5).

The importance of cultural diversity is explored, with reference to the Irish Traveller community as the largest minority ethnic group in Ireland and to the existence of two official languages, English and Irish, (as well as Ulster Scots, Irish Sign Language, and Cant, which is a language used by Travellers). Similar to the 2005 NCCA guidelines, *Guidelines on Traveller Education in Primary Schools* (DES, 2005) states that, "Young people should be enabled to appreciate the richness of a diversity of cultures and.... to recognise and to challenge prejudice and discrimination" (IES, 2010, p.23). Diversity is not new to Irish schools. Religious diversity has historically been a feature of the Irish education system, albeit in a restricted way, with the existence of Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland and other minority faith schools.

While the necessity for English as an additional language support is accepted, DES has been criticised for not providing for critical anti-racist practice/praxis in schools (Kitching, 2010). Could integration and inclusivity have been better fostered if schools had done more to develop awareness of and non-toleration of hostility, prejudice and racist behaviour?

Recent initiative

The latest initiative in the provision of English as an additional language (EAL) and in the development of intercultural education is the *Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015* (2010), a joint publication by the DES and the Office of the Minister for Integration. This strategy emerged following a commitment by the Irish government in 2001 to develop and to implement a National Action Plan against Racism (NPAR). Following consultation with the education partners, sectoral consultation meetings and the consideration of written submissions, including national and international research, the *Intercultural Education Strategy* (IES) was developed at a time when economic circumstances in Ireland were changing. In spite of this economic change a significant part of the population of Ireland is still

composed of migrant workers, which highlights the continuing importance of intercultural education in Irish schools.

Of importance to the success of the IES is the adoption of a whole school approach to the creation of an intercultural learning environment, which would encourage and promote active partnership, engagement and effective communication with the school community. A number of goals for educators have been identified to aid the IES in the creation of an inclusive, intercultural and integrated society. These include building the capacity of teachers/educators to develop an intercultural learning environment, the adoption of a whole school approach to creating this environment, the encouragement of active partnership and effective communication between schools, students, parents and communities.

The implementation of these goals for intercultural education is designed to build on the work already done in Irish schools, but it is "about thinking, planning and doing things differently, conscious of diversity and the need to create intercultural learning environments" (p.52). The IES is seeking a "concerted and evolving change of attitudes" (p.57).

Has intercultural education in Ireland been successful?

Issues of prejudice, racism and bullying have been identified as being both challenges and barriers to inclusion in our schools. In the study *Addressing the Challenges and Barriers to Inclusion in Irish Primary Schools* (2010), researchers in St Patrick's College found that, although present, these factors did not appear as major challenges to inclusion. "These barriers, according to the teachers... were more prevalent at post primary level and incidences of prejudice/racism were mostly reported in relation to minority groups".

These findings were not replicated by Devine et al (2008) who noted the "consistently hidden aspect of racial conflict in schools". Most obvious in the forms of name calling and fighting, reference is made to 'latent racism' where it is acknowledged that teachers may not be fully aware of occurrences of racism/racist behaviour in the classroom or schoolyard. Research by ICIS (1996), Myers (2003), Rutter (2003) and Tomlinson (2005) have shown evidence of hostility and racism towards newcomer children, which are often hidden under a layer of general acceptance.

Hospitality and hostility

I look to philosophy to explain the origins of the above mentioned hostility. Fear or suspicion of the unknown person, the 'stranger', the 'other' has long been present in societies around the world. History shows an attitude of prejudice or discrimination towards newcomers, and this is demonstrated today in attitudes and behaviour shown to the immigrant families who have changed the cultural make up of Ireland in recent years.

The challenge of choice between hospitality and hostility is both ancient and ever present, having roots in Greek Indo-European tradition as in the Abrahamic tradition (Kearney, 2011). Pohl (2006) speaks of the ancient tradition of hospitality. Christianity long had a tradition of offering hospitality to strangers, to acknowledging the needs of others. *The Bible*, in Matt: 5:43-48, speaks of the importance of the value of every human being, and asks "if you speak

only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary?" Further, in Matthew 25: 31-46, Jesus speaks of welcome and exclusion, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me". This theme of universalising the notion of neighbour, combined with the notion of recognising the image of God in all people is seen as a foundation for recognition, respect and care, (Pohl, 2006). The *Old Testament* exhorts the Israelites to understand the plight of others when, as is expressed in Exodus 23:9, "You shall not oppress a resident alien, you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt". This biblical exhortation speaks loudly to this author when thinking of newcomer peoples in Ireland. One would expect that Ireland, as a country long oppressed by foreign rule would be empathetic with the experiences of immigrants, would recognise the commonality of all peoples, and extend a welcome. Whether this has been the reality remains to be seen.

Nationalism in Ireland in the 20th century

Revolution in Ireland, the 1916 Easter Rising and the Irish Civil War in the 1920s brought much change. A new people emerged, an independent Irish people. The concept of 'being Irish' emerged. Irishness became synonymous with not being British, and was constructed through identifiers of religion, nation, diaspora, gender and class (Kitching, 2010).

Becoming a new nation in the early 20th century, and following hundreds of years of oppression and colonisation, it became necessary to define the new nation in the 1937 Constitution, which placed emphasis on Gaelic Romanticism, on Roman Catholicism and western liberalism. The family unit was idealised, as was the agricultural way of life. From that time Irishness was seen as sovereign, Gaelic and Catholic (Lee, 1989). Ireland in the 1950s, 1960s and again in the 1980s experienced emigration. Recession at home forced many to travel to England, America and later to Canada and Australia, for work. Many made new lives for themselves in these countries.

At home in Ireland the notion of what made one Irish was unchanged. Indeed it was not until the 2004 citizenship referendum that having at least one Irish citizen as a parent entitled one to Irish citizenship. Prior to this one had to be born on Irish soil. As already described, Ireland in the closing years of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century underwent dramatic demographic change. Many of the economic migrants who came to Ireland at that time experienced exploitation. Qualifications attained in these workers' home countries were often unrecognised, and there is evidence of employees working long hours for minimal wages (Hyland, 2010).

Having considered the short history of nationalism in Ireland, an emerging nation in the 20th century, the question may be posed whether the popular vision of the Irish as welcoming is an accurate one? Has the Irish nation developed sufficiently to offer a welcome to strangers?

Herder and the notion of cultural nationalism

Herder, acknowledged as the first multiculturalist, ascertained that each person has an

original way of being human. The notion emerged in the late 18th century that all persons have a voice which has something unique to say. Herder applied this concept to the individual, to language and to culture-bearing peoples. Seen as the founder of cultural nationalism, Herder is accepted as having "virtually invented the idea of belonging" (Berlin, cited in Gardels, 2009, p.30). He identified the need of a people to belong to a group, and "to feel at home somewhere, with your own kind". Using terms such as 'Volksgeist', the spirit of the people, (often associated with certain types of nationalism), nationalsprache, national language, and nationalgeschichte, national traditions, Herder explored the idea that all nations are of equal order in rank, and have the right to develop according to their national spirit. Condemning the exaltation of one's nation at the expense of others, Herder discusses the diversity of nations (Llobera, 1996). Not seeing diversity as a result of race, he is of the opinion that cultures developed as a result of a number of factors: geography, heredity, education and tradition. Berlin explores Herder's theory of each group or nation having its own Volksgeist, and explains this as a "a set of customs and a lifestyle, a way of perceiving and behaving that is of value solely because it is their own". The culture of a nation is derived from traditions that come from "collective historical experience shared only by members of the group", (Berlin, cited in Gardels, 2009, p.30). A person's culture determines his/her identity and as explored by White (2005), a sense of community and collective belonging is the basis of a sense of nationalism. When speaking of tradition the importance of language in Herder's conception of cultural nationalism becomes apparent.

The word 'Volk' meaning 'nation of people' is closely linked to the language of the people. The religious beliefs, customs, traditions and history of the nation are transmitted through the language of a people. Having a common language allows all sectors of the nation to grow and develop a common sentiment. The importance of language is further seen when Herder described it as a nation's "collective treasure, the source of its social wisdom and communal self-respect" (Herder, cited in Spicer, 2000).

Herder's ideas of cultural nationalism are applicable to all nations. Each nation could have its own Volksgeist, existing in a world which contains many nations. He saw the value of the many different cultures in the world, and argues that each nation is the result of a particular culture and way of life, with common traditions and a collective memory grounded in a particular language (White, 2005). Herder disagrees with nationalists who impose their values and ways of life on other peoples, being of the opinion that such imposition violates the organic unity of the original culture. Herder, (cited in White, 2005, p.173) explored cultural diversity as desirable, stating that "each people has its own specific genius and provides a uniquely valuable expression of humanitat". Acknowledging that different cultures have different customs and values, he argues that no culture is superior to others. White expresses the view that all cultures can learn something about goodness from others. Herder believed in cultural pluralism, as did other philosophers such as Herzen and Vico. They believed that cultures were incommensurable and, as expressed by Berlin, "for them... the plurality of cultures is irreducible", (Gardels, 2009, p.33). It is this aspect of Herder's views of nationalism, that all nations could peacefully co-exist, that make his work relevant to multiculturalists in the early 21st century.

Herder and cultural pluralism

When considering the concept of cultural pluralism I found the article by Spicer (2000) 'Herder on Cultural Pluralism and the State: An Examination of His views and Their Implications for Public Administration' very illuminating. Spicer provides many quotations from Herder which clarify for me the ideas I have been exploring.

As I have already stated Herder saw the culture of a nation, the Volk, with its language and traditions as being central to how people regarded themselves and their place among other nations. "The happiness of man... (is)... the child of practice, tradition and custom", (Herder, 1969, in Spicer, 2000 p.307). He considered that a people's culture and language were inseparable. Language was "the medium by which our minds and tongues were first moulded and by which images were transplanted from the hearts of our parents into our own" (Herder, in Barnard, p.164). Again Herder says that each nation "cherishes in and through its language the history, the poetry and songs about the great deeds of its forefathers" (p.169). Herder spoke about the many nations in the world, each with its own language, culture and tradition. I have already mentioned Herder's view that all nations are of equal importance. He considered that individual nations had different views regarding happiness and virtue, believing that "not a man, not a country, not a national history, not a state is like another" (in Spicer, 2000, p.312). Being aware of the value of individual nations' cultures, Herder observed that this diversity in ntional cultures meant that men and women living within any particular culture were often blind to many of the sources of happiness and virtues in other countries (in Spicer, 2000, p.312) and he further saw that this dismissal of the values of other cultures could turn into "contempt and disgust... (and could lead to)... prejudices, mob judgement and narrow nationalism" (Herder, cited in Spicer, 2000, p.312). Is this what has happened in Ireland? Cultural diversity in Ireland demands changes in attitude and in education.

Intercultural Guidelines in Ireland (NCCA, 2005) make use of the term interculturalism to describe the approach in Ireland to cultural diversity. This term "expresses a belief that we all become personally enriched by coming in contact with and experiencing other cultures, and that people of other cultures can and should be able to engage with each other and learn from each other" (NCCA, 2005, p.3). The guidelines serve to acknowledge Taylor's (1994) assertion that it is necessary to give recognition to all cultures as recognition forges identity. The hypothesis that all cultures are on the same footing and have something to share with other cultures is seen by Taylor as the beginning of a valuable multicultural curriculum. Speaking of the "normality of diversity in all areas of human life" the guidelines refer to the idea that "humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldview, and that this breadth of human life enriches us all" (NCCA, 2005, p.3). This echoes the notion espoused by Taylor (1994) and Herder (cited in Berlin, 1997), that nations are of equal value or worth, and have something to offer. In the educational arena many institutions, schools and colleges are criticised for not recognising or respecting the cultural identities of citizens. Gutmann (1994) expresses the opinion that significant controversy exists in society today over whether and how the identities of cultural and disadvantaged minorities are recognised. The identity of a person is based on ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and the question could be asked if people are treated as equals in politics?

In education? In schools, colleges and universities? A person's basic needs such as food and shelter may be fulfilled, but is cultural context necessary to give worth to identity? As unique individuals, part of this uniqueness is formed by the manner in which a person integrates, reflects upon and modifies his or her own cultural heritage and that of other people in society.

Herder's view of cultural nationalism, as discussed earlier, was misappropriated, and its theories developed into the Nazi Regime in Germany, Herder's homeland. Herder himself said that one nation should not "oppress or murder, or rob ... (the) ... American (native American)... (or the)... Negro... (because)... they are men like thee" (p.284).

Herder believed that each culture had its own values, and that these values could not always be assimilated into those of other cultures. He saw no way to compare or rank the cultures of nations, and in saying this observed that each society has within itself the "ideal of its own perfection, wholly independent of all comparison with others" (Herder, in Berlin 1997 p.428).

In describing Herder as an avatar of modern multiculturalism, Spicer (2000) points to Herder's argument that while nations strive to develop their own characteristics, it is this striving that is a basis of humanity and of diversity. Further stating his views on the values of different nations and on their co-existence he says "no other person has the right to constrain me to feel as he does, not the power to impart to me his mode of perception. No other person can, in short, transform my existence and identity into his," (Herder, 1969, p.308 as cited in Spicer, 2000).

Linker (2000) argues that while Herder was the originator of the debate on pluralism he was more ambivalent towards the topic than Berlin espouses. Even though Herder shows "signs of contempt for people who live entirely within the closed horizon of a particular centre, 'as if their anthill were the universe" (Linker, 2000, p.3), Linker suggests that in Herder's work, pluralists will not discover a writer who will affirm the value of pluralism, but rather that in the work of pluralists will find "someone ready and willing to take them on a quest to transcend it" (Linker, 2000, p.12). In the late 20th century and early 21st century, capitalism has shaped the political sovereignty of nations. The world sees emerging multicultural/multiracial societies which have resulted from migration and growing economies globally. White (2005) acknowledges that the world of the 21st century is very different to that of Herder's 18th century, but he continues by asking to what extent we should encourage the preservation of specific cultural differences among newcomer populations in a country.

Kellas (1991), speaks of a nation as a people who consider themselves bound by history, culture and ancestry. Characteristics of a nation include territory, language, culture and awareness of and feelings of belonging to a nation. Nationalism is seen as both an ideology and as the behaviour of a people. The national self-consciousness of a people leads to actions which define a nation, culturally and politically. Kellas discusses nationalist behaviour which "is based on the feeling of belonging to a community which is the nation" (Kellas, 1991, p.4). Those who do not belong to the nation are seen as "different, foreigners or aliens, with loyalties to their own nations" (Kellas, 1991, p.4). He differentiates between nationalist behaviour which leads to unrest and war and may result in one fighting and perhaps dying

for one's nation, and national behaviour which presents in "prejudice towards foreigners, stereotyping of other nations and solidarity with co-nationals". (Kellas, 1991, p.4).

Nones (2008, p.57), speaks of patriotism as the "sentiment of loyalty and attachment to a country", and he discusses the relationship between this sentiment and the increasing cultural diversity in western countries, which is largely caused by immigration. Exploring various meanings of the concepts of 'we' and 'others', Nones makes a distinction which is as prevalent in Ireland today, when many immigrants are commonly referred to as 'foreigners'. Nones (2008) and Kellas (1991) refer to a form of nationalism which leads to prejudice and distrust of newcomers. In Ireland today this form of nationalism is demonstrated in attitudes and behaviour shown to the immigrant families who have changed the cultural make up of Ireland in recent years. This suspicion is noted by Bryan (2008) when discussing intercultural and anti-racist documents and materials. The era of the Celtic tiger did not benefit all in our society, and many were left behind in a time of perceived material gain. Improved and more flexible labour market conditions meant that many were left behind in the search for higher paid jobs. Now that the time of economic boom is over, and many of the middle class are feeling the effects of the property market collapse, soaring costs of living and an insecure job market, there is an anxiety that their offspring will not experience the same privilege as they themselves have experienced and this anxiety, in a misguided form of nationalism (a consciousness of national boundaries), is projected onto immigrant workers and asylum seekers who are seen as having access to national resources which are now diminishing. There is a perception that immigrant workers and their families are not entitled to social welfare payments, housing and indeed jobs at a time when Irish workers are experiencing changed economic conditions. Garner (cited in Bryan, 2008) has expressed the view that increased expressions of racism are in part a "corollary of the mismatch of expectations and reality in a period of intense economic and social change".

Conclusion

It is worth reflecting on why NCCA guidelines and intercultural documents produced by other interested bodies have not been successful in halting the steady progression of racism in schools and in society. Although the NCCA *Guidelines on Intercultural education in Primary Schools* were published in 2005, teachers received no training in this area, and no resources other than the guidelines themselves were provided for schools. There has been no follow up research into or monitoring of the implementation of the guidelines. Schools at all levels, including primary schools, need to enable pupils to recognise that racism is linked to respect for and tolerance of children and adults from other cultures. The importance of intercultural education for all students, whether native Irish or newcomer, is stressed as the way forward to facilitate the newcomer child.

Early evidence of the origins of the distrust experienced by immigrant families in Ireland today can be traced to the 17th or 18th century when Herder developed his ideas on cultural nationalism. Believing that each nation has its own Volk, Herder believed that the Volk or culture of a nation could not be assimilated into that of another peoples', but that nations/cultures could exist alongside each other. Unfortunately, the value individual nations place

on their own Volk/Volksgeist meant that the culture of other nations was often dismissed, and, as already quoted, Herder saw that this dismissal of the values of other cultures could turn into "contempt and disgust... (and could lead to)... prejudices, mob judgement and narrow nationalism" (Spicer, 2000). These are the origins of the prejudices that are experienced by many of the families who have come to live in Ireland in recent years.

This article considered the development of nationalism in Ireland in the 20th century, giving rise to questions such as, did the creation of the Irish nation and the development of the 1937 Constitution occur too rapidly? Were the Irish traits we embrace and promote abroad (traditional music and dance, literature, the 'craic' and Guinness) embedded in the Irish people themselves, or were at least some of these traits forged by the creators of the new nation? Did immigration at the pace recently experienced occur too rapidly for a nation which had only recently emerged from British rule?

What can now be done to change the reception given to these people who have come to live in our countries for a number of years, or who intend to make Ireland their permanent home?

Nones (2008) and Kellas (1991) when discussing the existence of cultural pluralities consider that it is possible to create a completely new understanding, in the sense of being not 'regressive and violent', but 'progressive and emancipatory,' (Nones, 2008, p.58), where the host nation has to acknowledge that the status quo has changed, that Ireland indeed has entered a new era, that a 'realignment is needed between past conceptualisations and present realities' (Nones, 2008, p.61).

These sentiments are apparent also in the IES strategy, which is seeking a "concerted and evolving change of attitudes". (DES, 2010, p.57). I conclude by referring to the IES document which states the following: "Integration is the responsibility of everyone, based on inclusion and respect for differences: all of society (both host and migrant) has a role to play in promoting an intercultural ethos, integration, inclusion and diversity. Likewise, all educators regardless of whether or not they work with migrant students have a responsibility to develop an intercultural learning environment. Parents and communities have a role to play in the process. The role extends to rejecting racism, bias, stereotyping and discrimination. This approach is not solely the remit of the education sector: it is the responsibility of Irish society." (DES, 2010, p.67)

The IES document, in seeking this "concerted and evolving change of attitudes" (DES, 2010, p.57) is aimed at a number of sections of the population; schools, educators working with migrant students and those not working with migrant students, parents and communities of the host nation and of the migrant nations.

There is a need for a conscious effort to be made to include newcomer families in the life of the school community. Can teachers be re-educated by means of inservice in areas such as discrimination and racist behaviour? Can attitudes to immigrant peoples be changed? Can schools make a difference if prejudice exists in the home? Will the *Intercultural Education Strategy* be successful where the 1995 guidelines on intercultural education have obviously fallen short of achieving their aims? Are the roots of prejudice and distrust too deeply ingrained in Ireland as a nation for the development of an intercultural learning environment, and a multicultural society? These are questions which can only be answered

in time, but schools, especially primary schools, must do all possible in the provision of an intercultural learning environment, in the "provision of an education for all children, both indigenous and immigrant, that values difference and educates all children to embrace the diversity that arises from increasing human mobility and broader processes of globalisation" (Devine, 2009, p.535).

Bibliography

Barnard, F.M. (Ed.) (2009). *J.G. Herder on social and political culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Berlin, I. (2000). *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. Princeton University Press.

Bryan, A. (2008). The Co-articulation of National Identity and Interculturalism in the Irish Curriculum: Educating for Democratic Citizenship? *London Review of Education*, 47-58.

Central Statistics Office (2006). *Census 2006: Preliminary Report*. Dublin: Stationery Office

Cummins, J. (2011). Diverse Futures: Immigration, Education, and Identity in Changing Times. In P. Ó Duibhir, R. McDaid and A. O'Shea (Eds) *All Changed? Culture and identity in contemporary Ireland* (pp 49-70). Dublin: Duras

Department of Education, and the Office of the Minister for Integration (2010). *Intercultural Education Strategy, 2010-2015*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science. (1999). Primary School Curriculum. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science. (2002). *Guidelines on Traveller Education in Primary Schools*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (2007). Circular 53/07. Dublin: Author.

Department of Education and Science (2009). Circular15/09. Dublin: Author.

Devine, D., Kenny, M., and Macneela, E. (2008). Naming the 'other': Children's Construction and Experience of Racisms in Irish Primary Schools. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 369-385.

Devine, D. (2009). Mobilising capitals? Migrant children's negotiation of their everyday lives in school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30(5) 521-535

Garner, S. (2004). Racism in the Irish Experience. In A. Bryan, (2008) The Co-articulation of National Identity and Interculturalism in the Irish Curriculum: Educating for Democratic Citizenship? *London Review of Education*, (6)1 47-58.

Gardels, N. (2009). Return of the Volksgeist. *New Perspect Q24 no4*, 29-39.

Gutmann, A. (ed) (1994). *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition*. Princeton University Press.

Herder, J.G. (1969). J.G. Herder on social and political culture. In F.M. Barnard (Ed.) *J.G. Herder on social and political cuture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press in Spicer, (2000).

Hyland, M. (2010). *Migrant Workers and Access to the Statutory Dispute Resolution Agencies*. Dublin: Labour Relations Commission.

ICIS (1996). *Routes of Racism: The Social Basis of Racist Action*. in Devine et al 2008.

IILT (2006). *Up and Away: A Resource Book for English Language Support in the Primary Schoo*l. Dublin: IILT.

IILT (2007). *Together for Inclusion: Toolkit for Diversity in the Primary School*. Dublin: IILT and SELB.

INTO (1998). *The Challenge of Diversity*. Dublin: INTO.

INTO (2002). *Intercultural Guidelines*. Dublin: INTO.

INTO (2006). *Newcomer Children in the Primary School*. Dublin: INTO.

Kearner, R. (2011). Welcoming the Stranger. In P. Ó Duibhir, R. McDaid and A. O'Shea (Eds) *All Changed? Culture and identity in contemporary Ireland* (pp 168-178). Dublin: Duras.

Kellas, J.G. (1991). *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Kitching, K. (2010). An excavation of the racialised politics of viability underpinning education policy in Ireland. *Irish Educational Studies*, 29(3) 213-229.

Lee, J.J. (1989). *Ireland, 1912-1985: Politics and Society*, Cambridge.

Linker, D. (2000). The Reluctant Pluralism of J.G. Herder. *Review of Politics* 62(2) 267-285.

Llobera, J.R. (1996). Political and Cultural Nationalism. In J.R. Llobera, *The God of Modernity. The Development of Nationalism in Western Education* (p. 154). Oxford: Berg.

Myers, K. (n.d.). Critical voices: Refugees, Exclusion and Schooling. in Devine et al 2008.

NCCA (2005). *Guidelines on Intercultural Education in the Primary School*. Dublin: NCCA.

NCCA (2005). *Guidelines on Intercultural Education in the Primary School*. Dublin: NCCA.

Nones, A. (2008). Toward a Conception of Welcoming and Cooperating Patriotisms. *Perspectives 01*, 16 (1), 57-83.

OECD (2009). *OECD reviews of Migrant Education*. OECD.

Rutter, J. (2003). *Supporting Refugee Children in 21st Century Britain*. in Devine et al 2008.

Spicer, M.W. (2000). Herder on Cultural Pluralism and the State: an Examination of his Views and their Implications for Public Administration. *Administrative theory and praxis* 22 (2) 309-325.

Sweeney, P. (1999). *The Celtic Tiger: Ireland's Continuing Economic Miracle*. UK: Oak Tree Press.

Taylor, C. (1994). The Politics of Recognition. In C. Taylor, *Multiculturalism* (pp. 25-75). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tomlinson, S. Race, Ethnicity and Education under New Labour. Oxford Review of Education, in Devine et al 2008.

Travers, J. et al (2010). *Addressing the Challenges and Barriers to Inclusion in Irish Schools*. Dublin: St Patrick's College.

White, R. (2005). Herder: On the Hospitality and Hostility Ethics of Nationalism. *Humanitas*, 18, 166-181.

Becoming a primary school principal in Ireland: deputy principalship as preparation

DEREK GRANT

Abstract

This study explores both the principal's and deputy principal's roles in management and leadership to discover how better to prepare the latter to progress to principalship. The research used semi-structured interviews with 12 primary deputy-principals exploring their construction of deputyship and principalship from their professional socialisation experiences. Findings revealed the complex relationship which exists between both roles and the extent to which the pervading school culture determines how much meaningful leadership opportunity is distributed beyond the principal. A major outcome of the study is a constructed knowledge of the nature and culture of Irish primary deputyship. Three new typologies of deputy principalship provide a new perspective on the deputyship role, concluding that the gap in experiences and knowledge between deputyship and principalship is so great that energy should flow into the formation of a formal, planned and structured preparation for a deputyship transition into principalship.

Keywords: **principal, deputy principal, distributed leadership, role, preparation**

Introduction

It is a generally accepted belief that quality school leadership is of pivotal importance in determining school success. This point of view is commonly held by the research community and increasingly acknowledged in the 21st century (Bush, 2011). House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman and Gupta (2004, p.15) define leadership as "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organisations of which they are members". Hallinger and Snidvongs (2005) refer to research conducted over the past 20 years which indicates that school level leadership makes a difference in the school climate and in the outcomes of schooling. In order to develop a clearer understanding of how to create and sustain quality leadership, the general tendency has been to focus through the single lens of the principalship to the detriment of the deputy principalship. "Whilst shelves groan under the weight of books and papers concerned with headship in primary schools, there are few which address the issues which are of direct concern to deputy heads" (Day, Hall, Gammage and Coles, 1993, p.ix).

Fortunately, the volume of research into the role of deputyship is increasing, thanks to researchers such as Ashley Oleszewski, Alan Shoho and Bruce Barnett (2012) of the University of Texas at San Antonio. However, it must be acknowledged that it is still an under presented

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

role in the professional literature in comparison to principalship. Thus, the deliberate focus of this research is on the primary deputy principalship and its impact upon quality school leadership. The central issue focuses upon how deputy principals can feel better equipped for a possible transition to principalship. The deputy principalship is an important area of inquiry and deserves attention (Tripkin, 2006; Weller and Weller, 2002). This research hopes to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the deputyship role from an Irish perspective with particular relevance to the primary sector. It will explore the challenges, shortfalls and successes of the deputyship as they provide meaningful support to their principal, and how these dimensions contribute to preparation for principalship. In order to focus on the preparedness and willingness of deputy principals for a transition to principalship, there needs to be an exploration of their current role. This research will assess their current experiences as an effective training and stepping stone to principalship.

The traditional narrow focus of leadership scholarship on the principal

A substantial body of literature is concerned with the role of the principal, and consequently evidence concerning school leadership has come mainly from the perspective of the principalship (Muijs and Harris, 2003). To date by far the largest majority of educational leadership studies have been about the practices of principals or heads (Day and Leithwood, 2007; McEwan, 2003; Reeves, 2006). This traditional view of school leadership, focusing solely on the principal, has come in for much criticism, and research now claims that successful leadership involves a distribution of the leadership role leading to a more team orientated approach.

While a considerable body of research exists about school leadership, very little is from the Irish context (Crowley, 2006) and this is at a time "when governments and foundations round the world are developing unparalleled resources to the development of aspiring leaders, as well as those already in the role" (Day and Leithwood, 2007, p.1). There is limited research in the Irish context on educational leadership, particularly studies on the school principalship (Ummanel, 2012) and deputy principalship. Due to the sparse amount of academic research on school leadership undertaken in the Irish Republic, it has been necessary to focus on literature from other western and non-western countries.

The move towards distributed forms of leadership

The role of the deputy principal needs to be set in the context of the 21st century popularity of distributed leadership. However, for the purpose of this study, the value of distributed leadership is not being investigated, instead it is simply a lens from which to examine and better understand the deputyship. Distributed leadership attracts a range of meanings and is associated with a variety of practices. Numerous educational theorists provide differing notions about what exactly is meant by this form of leadership hence a number of different usages of the term have emerged (Mayrowetz, 2008). A considerable amount of literature has been devoted to the concept with regard to theory and practice of educational literature. For many educational researchers, such as Leithwood and Riehl (2003) and Gronn (2003),

distributed leadership is the theory of choice which plays a significant role in modelling what contemporary school leadership should look like. It is their preferred public model for school leadership by developing a sense of responsibility in others apart from the principal. It develops a strong culture of staff collaboration and cohesion.

Evidence from the leadership and school improvement fields suggests that distributed forms of leadership have both the power and potential to transform schools for the better (Harris and Townsend, 2007) by removing the burden for improvement upon the principal as the single strong instructional leader in the school system. Distributed leadership has achieved popularity as the engagement of a wider group of staff is more effective in implementing change, and in a more complex world, the skills and experience of more people are necessary to promote successful leadership (Hatcher, 2005).

Distributed leadership is a popular strategy for reducing principal workload (Spillane, 2006). A number of studies have highlighted the need for leadership to be distributed throughout organisations and the possible advantages in terms of school improvement and better pupil learning outcomes (Mulford, 2008; OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development], 2008; LDS [Leadership Development for Schools], 2007). Significantly, the enthusiasm for distributed leadership within education is not wholeheartedly endorsed by the research community. There is also the belief that the concept has been used to create a mirage, an apolitical workplace where the theory is no longer the new kid on the block but almost the only child in sight (Lumby, 2013).

The difficulty in capturing the essence of deputyship

Educational literature in the past dealing with the role of the deputy principal was very sparse and lacking in rigour (Chi-Kin Lee, Kwan and Walker, 2009), but this is changing. This senior school leadership role is still not clearly defined (Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Armstrong, 2005), being described as the invisible role and the neglected role (Glanz, 2004), and with no great attempt made to 'unpack' the deputy principalship, leaving an "ambiguous and unrecognised role with poorly defined tasks" (Shoho, Barnett and Tooms, 2012, p.3).

The deputy principalship has evolved in response to the recognised need to distribute leadership more widely to achieve improved learning outcomes for pupils (Harris, 2002). It is generally agreed that the deputy principalship role is vital for school success (Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Armstrong, 2005), and through distributed leadership there is a paradigm shift in the way that leadership and management in a school are organised, away from hierarchy to a horizontal collegiate structure where the deputy can exercise leadership: "It's not just possible any longer to 'figure it out' from the top, and have everyone else following the orders of the grand 'strategist'" (Senge in *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership*, 2000, p.14). This is why Hartley (in Bush, 2011, p.88) "argues that its popularity may be pragmatic: to ease the burden of overworked headteachers". There needs to be a fully collaborative culture which draws upon the full range of professional skills and expertise to be found among the members of the organisation (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996).

The deputyship has not come under the same close scrutiny as the principalship or class teacher role, and this has not helped to establish an explanatory theory which would lead to

a better understanding of the role of the deputy principal. There is a general lack of a sound conceptual understanding of what is meant by a deputy principal. Deputy principals as a group have not been subject to the same substantial number of formal research studies (Sutter, 1996), and even with what research has been undertaken there is still the need to carry out additional research in the areas of training, professional development, and the transition to principalship (Oleszewski, Shoho and Barnett, 2012). According to Cranston, Tromans and Reugebrink (2004), research in this area is relatively sparse and identifies only a partial representation of the role. Marshall and Hooley (2006) explain that this does nothing to capture the essence of it. In fact, there is no universal role definition for a deputy principal (Weller and Weller, 2002). Only recently has the literature made any attempt to illustrate the nature of the deputyship (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). The role of deputy principal was created due to expanding bureaucracy and the speed at which the role of the principal was becoming impossible for one person to handle (Scoggins and Bishop, 1993) first appearing early in the 20th century (Tripkin, 2006). Mertz (2006) explains that the role emerged in response to unprecedented growth in student numbers in schools and simultaneous increases in principals' responsibilities.

Deputies are second in command to the principal yet receive scant attention in the research literature by policy makers and academic researchers. Astounding, as all but the smallest schools have a deputy principal, yet how they contribute to school effectiveness is little understood (Harvey and Sheridan, 1995). Some larger schools may have more than one deputy-principal. The position has different labels in different countries, called the deputy principal in Ireland and Australia, the deputy head in the United Kingdom, the vice principal in Canada and the assistant principal in the USA. Regardless of the particular label, deputy principals are one hierarchical level below the school principal in schools.

One of the most simplistic and humorous opinions on the duties of the deputy principal from Dallas, Texas, is that they fill their days with three Bs – "Books, Behinds and Buses" (Good, 2008, p.46). This is not all that different from the early literature, where the role of the deputy principalship was associated primarily with student discipline and attendance, and was perceived as having little influence on the overall leadership of schools (Smith, 1987; Greenfield, 1985). This earlier literature from America was limited as it gave no acknowledgement of the professional support that a deputy could give their principal. The duties centred round student supervision and discipline. There was not a highly defined job description with the deputy often being given tasks that they weren't trained to do. The literature from this time showed how the principal dictated duties, responsibilities and experiences of the deputy principal. This early literature failed to recognise that principals were not helping in preparing deputies for other positions (Greenfield, 1985) and this may be a reason why a significant number of deputy principals were remaining longer in their positions (Gross, Shapiro and Meehan, 1980). More recent research conducted in Queensland, Australia, found that deputy principals are expected to engage in a variety of potentially complex and challenging management and leadership activities, also explaining that the available literature identifies only a partial representation of the role (Cranston et al., 2004). This identified role is described in terms of traditional and restricted sets of administrative, managerial and custodial responsibilities, and little has been done to advance an alternative,

future-focused, strategic and collaborative leadership view of the role needed to meet the increasing complexity of schools (Beare, 2001 in Cranston, Tromans and Reugebrink, 2004, p.228; Caldwell and Spinks, 1998).

The deputyship in Ireland

The position of vice principal was first established in Ireland in 1920 because so few promotional opportunities were available to teachers. Most of the narrow literature in Ireland dealing with the deputyship comes from the IPPN, who explain that the role of the deputy principal has often been defined as 'underdeveloped', 'unclear', and 'confused' (IPPN, 2007, p.4). Circular 16/73, a policy statement issued by the Department of Education in Ireland, rather cautiously identified three aspects of the role of deputy principal: "assisting the principal in the day-to-day organisation and supervision of the school, teaching duties and assignment of specific duties by the principal" but still identified the control by the principal as determining the deputy's role. Since this description was provided over 30 years ago there has been no real policy or strategic development that responds to the leadership and management role of the deputy principal. Reference is made to the vice principal in the *Rules for National Schools* (Department for Education (1965) Rules 75, 76, 123). Rule 123 requires that: "The principal (or in his absence, the vice principal…) must carefully carry out the instructions in the Roll Book, Report Book and Register as to the keeping and care of school records".

In Ireland, all registered teachers with the Irish Teaching Council (ITC) are eligible to be appointed as deputy principals within either the primary or secondary school system, depending on their teaching qualification. There is currently no mandatory preparation or training as a part of the professional socialisation for the position, and the general requirement is successful prior work experience as a teacher. Irish primary deputy principals are paid a promoted post allowance along with their teaching salary for assuming the role of deputy principal. This allowance is linked to the number of authorised teaching posts in the school.

Research by Terry Allen in the Irish Republic (2003), entitled *Two 'Heads' are Better than One: An Examination and Analysis of the Role of the Deputy Principal in Irish Primary Schools*, focused on the position of deputy principals in Irish primary schools. It encompassed an inquiry into the perceived role, workloads, relationship and leadership dimension of the role of deputy principal. It examined and analysed the role of deputy principals in supporting and developing professional learning communities in schools. The findings identified a clear leadership role for the deputy principal in cooperation and partnership with the principal. The particular value of Allen's research is that it draws on the experience and opinions of both principals and deputy principals, thereby offering two valuable perspectives on the functioning and the effectiveness of the deputyship role in Irish primary schools. A successful reconceptualisation and transformation of the deputyship such as that described in Allen's study may lead to greater job satisfaction and a broadening of professional horizons amongst practitioners, thus creating greater career motivation for a future principalship position having already experienced openness of the boundaries of leadership.

The deputy principalship in Irish schools has the potential to be a very important role, yet there is still not enough reference in policy or research to the role of deputy principal (Fullan, 2006 in Máirtín (ed.), 2007). The deputy principalship offers huge potential in alleviating some of the demands of principalship brought about by the tremendous pressure for schools to be more publicly accountable. The role is often considered to be of pivotal importance in a school's organisational structure, but not considered to be one of leadership (Ruwoldt, 2006), resulting in missed opportunities for dual functioning potential.

Moving from deputy to principal: principalship preparation

Deciding to change role from deputy to principal is a life changing decision, as it involves becoming someone different. Deputy principals need to be able to see themselves in the position of principal and to 'identify' themselves as a principal (Thomson, 2009) and, in doing so, make a successful transition into the role. 'Transitions' occur through a firm resolve to act on the basis of the mental, emotional and physical experiences of a related turning point (Duncan, 1995). People will only choose to change roles if the expected satisfaction from doing so exceeds that associated with their current position (Boskin, 1974) and if they receive support and encouragement from their colleagues – particularly the principal, who has first hand experience of the role. Their prior work experience and other elements such as age and family commitments are also considerable factors in their decision to move from deputyship to principalship.

Many studies deal with the role of principal teachers, quality of school management, school effectiveness and leadership effectiveness: Earley and Weindling (2004), Fidler and Atton (2004). There is less information available on preparing deputy principals for a principalship, and this is unfortunate as "overall, there seems to be a broad international consensus among policy makers that the capacities of those who aspire to become a principal need to be developed" (Cowie and Crawford, 2007, 132). Leadership preparation is an important influence on the ultimate performance of learners in educational settings, hence the emerging awareness among all the educational partners that the preparation and development of school leaders cannot be left to chance (Clarke, Wildy and Pepper, 2007). However, there is little agreement on how to organise and develop preparation for future leadership (Taysum, 2010) with contradictory views on whether or not principals' preparatory courses adequately prepare new principals for their roles, which is surprising, as "increasingly elaborate and extensive programs of training, assessment and certification, especially for school principals have mushroomed in many parts of the world" (Ribbins, 2008, p.61).

Few studies have explored in depth the nature of learning which supports management development – a very important area, as career motivation can be enhanced through career development support (Day and Allen, 2002). Earley and Weindling (2007) did, however, report that a key point in preparing for a principalship was the breadth of experience of a deputy principal, and their research revealed that the possibility of becoming a school principal without going through a considerable period as a deputy was very rare in secondary schools. Similarly, Fidler (1997) points out that the quality of headship is heavily influenced by the opportunity given to experience various tasks throughout the career path of teachers.

Draper and McMichael (1998) suggest that deputies who become principals would feel ready for the management role because of the extensive preparation they had undergone and because of their long-term initiation into a management identity. This substantiates the views of Cowie and Crawford (2007), who believe future principals need to have the opportunities to practise the skills and abilities the job demands in order to deal productively and confidently with the leadership and management issues they are likely to face on appointment. Given these findings it is hardly surprising that policy makers are increasingly turning to educational leadership preparation and development as a means to improve schools and student achievement (Hale and Moorman, 2003).

However, Crow (2004) argues that preparation for a contemporary principalship has not received comparable attention, despite awareness of the importance of leadership for school improvement and students' attainment. Fortunately, as can be seen from the literature, there are some indications that this is changing, and the interest in educational leadership and management has led to investment in the preparation and development of school leaders across many countries (Hallinger, 2003; Brundrett, 2001).

Research aims

The purpose of this enquiry was to explore the current role of the deputy-principalship in Irish primary schools and how its incumbents may be encouraged to progress their professional careers to principalship. It was set within paradigms of distributed leadership and role theory hence the exploration was widened to include discussions of principals' roles. The research used perceptions from a sample of Ireland's primary deputy principals to explore through the research questions:

- role definitions of deputy principalship,
- role definitions of principalship,
- features which might attract or dissuade deputies from proceeding further in their careers to principalship, and
- forms of principalship preparation to best encourage deputies to become principals.

Research methodology

This research adopted an interpretive qualitative approach. This theoretical perspective provided a context for the research process and a basis for its logic and its criteria. The reality of the social world emerges as a direct result of the processes by which respondents negotiate within it. This research sought to give respondents agency so that they could meaningfully engage in reflection about themselves and their personal context in the social world. The semi-structured interview was chosen to develop an understanding of the social reality in which respondents exist. There is a concern for the individual and the need to focus social inquiry on the meanings and values of people and their social actions. The interviews with 12 deputy principals provided valuable evidence about the current lived realities of Irish primary school leadership.

The research sample

Purposive sampling gave me control to select a specific target group who were primary deputy principals from the midland counties of Ireland. Deputy principal respondents fulfilled the criterion that respondents should have enough detailed information to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2007). Six respondents came from schools with a teaching principal and the remaining six came from schools with an administrative principal. This was deliberate so that meaningful comparisons from both principalship positions would be represented in the data. Both male and female deputy principals were chosen, as the literature showed that gender may have an impact on the willingness or unwillingness of applicants to apply for a principalship.

The research instrument

I chose semi-structured interviews as they allowed me to probe for more detailed responses, where respondents are asked to clarify what they have said (Gray, 2004). This allowed me broadly to control the agenda and the process of the interview, with the respondents being free to respond as they saw fit. It has predetermined questions but the order can be modified based upon what the interviewer finds appropriate. The semi-structured style of interview honoured the professional knowledge (tacit and explicit) of each voice. This approach provided qualitative depth and space for respondents to discuss the research questions from within their own frame of reference. Semi-structured interviews facilitated a reflexive, interviewee-centred, flexible and stimulating discursive environment, as proposed by Sarantakos (2005).

Research quality

I employed Lincoln and Guba's framework of trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The framework introduced in the 1980s gave fresh ways of expressing validity, reliability and generalisability "outside of the linguistic confines of a rationalistic paradigm" (Tobin and Begley, 2004, p.4). Their concepts of credibility and dependability provided the initial platform from which much of the current debate on rigour emerged. They refined their concept of trustworthiness by introducing criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Research findings

The initial impetus for this study came from a lack of Irish research pertaining to primary school deputy principals and their career advancement. Significant satisfaction in the role does not lead to a greater desire for principalship among the Irish deputies interviewed for this research. When the causes of this were investigated, current incumbents' experiences were found to lack any genuinely meaningful forms of capacity-building for principalship, and this links to earlier international literature on deputyship (Porter, 1996). This appears to add to deputies' limited career aims, since desires to remain a deputy (or to progress) were found to be closely connected to family, community, satisfaction in current role and the need for relatedness by being compliant rather than reflective or critical. In this regard, the study

underlines how Ireland's deputies do not differ in their career intentions from those as far away as Hong Kong (Walker and Kwan, 2009) or Australia (Cranston, 2007).

Nature and culture of Irish primary deputyship

During the analysis it became apparent that power, perceived power and power sharing have a huge bearing on deputyship, making it possible to broaden the data analysis. The theme is sub-divided into five key features which provide a deeper understanding of the nature of contemporary Irish primary deputyship, (i) maintaining order and stability, (ii) role clarity – potential to be clear or ambiguous, (iii) experience of school leadership, (iv) strong influence of the principal on the deputy principal role, (v) level of self-efficacy amongst deputy principals. These key features are summarised in Table 1.

Deputy principals operate within a particular social framework, each of them being socialised into their particular role meaning each deputy has a different role according to the school in which s/he works. The culture of the school impacts on them, with cultural norms influencing the way school leadership is exercised. The deputy influences school culture to a lesser degree. The findings revealed that, within schools, respondents have learnt the norms and expectations, often referred to as career socialisation. People in the schools interact with each other, and these interactions do not just emerge but are premeditated. This research demonstrates for Irish deputies the significance of social learning as discussed in international studies such as Super, 1953. In Irish primary schools, this social learning takes the form of social experiences on career trajectories impacting on an individual's self-conception.

Table 1: knowledge of the nature and culture of Irish primary deputyship

Maintaining order and stability	**Deputies**: ◈ are influenced by school culture ◈ are strongly acculturated to school norms ◈ are very concerned with school maintenance ◈ have little influence on school culture ◈ lack authority to exercise school leadership
Role ambiguity	**The vague role description leads to a:** ◈ limited definition of the role ◈ difficulty differentiating between role as educator and role as senior school leader
School leadership experience	**Deputies could expand their experiences of school leadership if they are:** ◈ given more opportunities to do so ◈ willing to make more opportunities to do so ◈ prepared to critically examine and change their own acculturations to existing patterns ◈ able to transcend the strength of school culture that militates against ◈ deputies' involvement in leadership

Principals' effect on deputy principals' role	**Principals are the greatest influence on deputy roles because:** ◆ deputies regard them as the main authority ◆ principals model values, behaviours and beliefs ◆ principals define parameters for deputies' roles ◆ principals control deputies' access to principals
Deputy principals' self efficacy	**Deputies have a low self efficacy because:** ◆ their authority comes from the principal ◆ they shape their practices according to the principals' vision ◆ principals' praise or disapproval highlights deputies' powerlessness ◆ deputies have little autonomy or decision-making powers ◆ principals' ideologies dominate schools

Emergent typologies of deputy principalship

From the preceding construction of the nature and culture of deputyship, three typologies of deputy principalship are suggested as appropriate to Irish primary schools' current managerial arrangements. For these it was decided to use the terms transactional, prescribed and strategic to best describe the deputies' characteristics that emerged from this study (summarised in Table 2). They are unique to this research and have not been adapted from anyone else's ideas. All respondents experienced one of the typologies, each encompassing their own properties. Distributed leadership is normally concerned with leadership practices beyond the principal and deputy principal; however, owing to the size of some of the primary schools involved in this study, it was not deemed necessary to move beyond these two leadership positions when observing leadership capacity.

Table 2: new typologies of deputy principalship for Irish primary schools

Transactional deputyship	◆ Duties assigned by principal through necessity on an ad hoc basis ◆ No specific list of responsibilities furnished to deputy-principal ◆ Designated tasks focus on the smooth running and organisation of the school ◆ Little or no contribution to the organisational learning ◆ No collegiality or collaborative culture ◆ Sole leadership resides with principal, who is unwilling to relinquish power and control ◆ Doesn't acknowledge potential for deputy-principal leadership ◆ 'Pseudo' leadership role ◆ Negative perception of principalship
Prescribed deputyship	◆ Duties assigned by principal ◆ Often conflicting priorities ◆ Responsibilities generally include drafting particular curricular or organisational policies ◆ Responsibility for maintenance and equipment issues ◆ Some scope to develop the leadership role beyond management duties ◆ No significant impact on teaching and learning outside of their own teaching responsibilities ◆ Negative perception of principalship ◆ Limited collegiality and collaborative culture present at leadership level

Strategic deputyship	◆ Based on planned opportunities for deputy to contribute to the development of leadership ◆ Shared leadership practice ◆ Open boundaries of leadership ◆ Opportunities to exercise leadership through strategic planning and policy development ◆ Direct involvement in decision-making ◆ Direct bearing on classroom practice ◆ Flexibility and autonomy ◆ Positive impact on the principalship

Transactional deputyship

Half of the sample (six respondents) were categorised within the transactional deputyship typology, which has very limited capacity in terms of its ability to implement any strategic actions aimed at school improvement. Within this typology respondents operate at a managerial level only. They are not required to function at a strategic level and this means they are curtailed in impacting directly on school improvement. This means that their level of influence on the school is limited and constrained. The research found an emphasis on principal-centred supervisory routines rather than on collaborative and shared leadership involving both principal and deputy being characterised by a lack of clarity.

Prescribed deputyship

One third of respondents were categorised within the prescribed deputyship typology. Unlike the previous typology they were furnished with a specific list of duties by the principal, who did not have the time, or desire, to undertake the particular management tasks himself or herself. This is the fundamental difference between transactional and prescribed deputyship. The deputy principals operate at a managerial level within this typology. They fulfil important maintenance duties within the school organisation that would otherwise have to be undertaken by another member of staff if they didn't undertake them. Leadership and management are equally important if schools are to operate smoothly and achieve their objectives (Bush, Bell and Middlewood, 2010). Gronn (2000) views distributed leadership as a form of aggregate leadership behaviour, but this is not wholly embraced in this typology.

Strategic deputyship

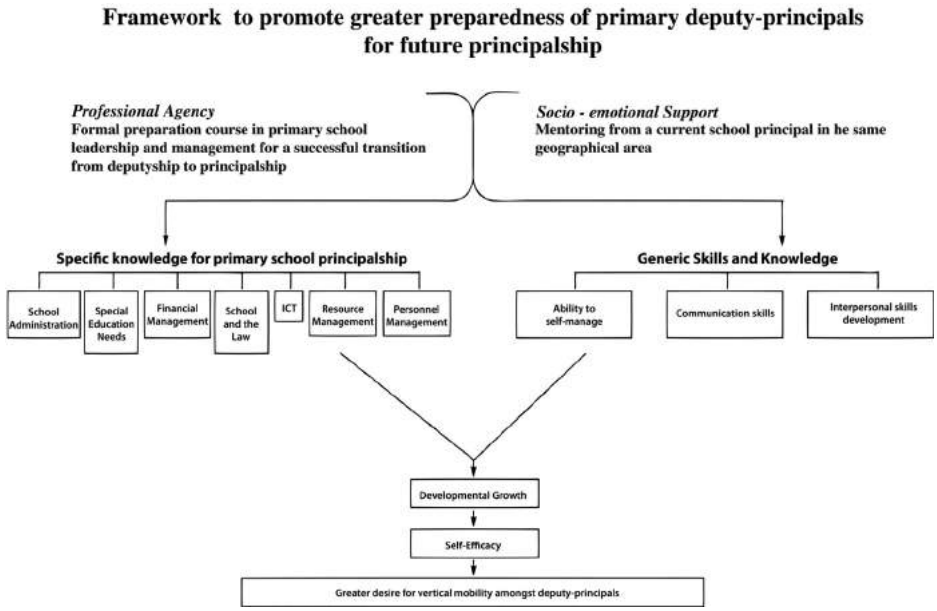
This final typology is significantly different from the previous two, and only two respondents were categorised within it. The dimensions within it are more in line with modern literature, pertaining to effective and sustainable school leadership teams through involvement with instructional and transformational leadership. Deputy principals within this typology operate at both strategic and managerial levels experiencing to some degree all the job responsibility characteristics of leadership categorised by Kwan's (2009) Hong Kong study into the deputy principalship as a preparation for principalship.

1. External communication and connection.
2. Quality assurance and accountability.
3. Teaching.
4. Learning and curriculum.

5. Staff management.
6. Resource management.
7. Leader and teacher growth and development.
8. Strategic direction and policy development.

Towards a professional form of principalship preparation

Fig 1: principalship preparation framework for deputy principals in Irish primary schools, 2013



Regardless of which deputyship typology respondents came under, 11 of the 12 respondents asserted a strong desire for a strategic principalship preparation model. This is linked to the research literature which found that principal preparation is a source of concern globally. The development of the initial deputy principalship typologies led to the construction of a proposed purpose-built framework (see Figure 1) to support, motivate and equip deputy principals in their vertical mobility irrespective of the three deputy principalship typologies. The preparation model proposed is an ideal based on the strategic deputyship typology and, therefore, routes into the preparation might need to be differently engineered according to the entrant's base category. However, without some form of professional development deputy-principals may not be confident to take up a principalship role in schools (Chi-Kin Lee, Kwan and Walyer, 2009). Deputy principals categorised under either the transactional deputyship typology or prescribed deputyship typology would benefit from a greater exposure to all of the components within the framework. Deputy principals fortunate enough to be categorised under the strategic deputyship typology may find that they already experience to some degree many of the individual components included on the framework. They could still benefit from mentoring by another school principal in a different school.

Each element of the framework impacts on the level of preparedness of Irish primary deputy principals for principalship in particular response to the inadequacies of the first two forms of distributed leadership (Transactional and Prescribed) in Irish primary schools. Respondents, regardless of what typology they were categorised under, were largely of the opinion that professional development for principalship may be significantly strengthened by incorporating direct strategies for formal, systematic pre-service leadership training such as those already well-established in North America, Europe and Australia, as a result of education reform and government policy initiatives. In providing such training in Ireland to meet deputies' needs, the obvious deficiencies identified in the experiences of deputies show a lack of knowledge of how to run schools at strategic levels. This is supported in literature from the USA finding that, "one of the great myths of education is that the position of assistant principal is not a proper and useful training ground for principalship," (Kelly, 1987, p.13). This finding emerged as central in this research. Therefore, the tenet of one role being entirely separate to the other was one of the first elements of which the new framework had to take account.

The structure of the support respondents described is illustrated on the framework (see Figure 1) and is in two parts: a formal preparation course with concern for intellectual capital, and mentoring focusing on social capital. Respondents would value the opportunity to support and be supported by deputy-principals from other schools as they construct their generic skills and knowledge. The deputies in this research believed a very content-specific course would adequately bridge the gap between their existing skills, knowledge and expertise and those needed to perform the role of principal. The content they identified as necessary for their developmental support focused on school administration, special education needs, financial management, school and the law, ICT, resource management, and personnel management (see Figure 1). These seven components highlight a skills deficit where it is evident that the inexperience of dealing with them evokes feelings of stress, anxiety and discomfort, creating a need to gain new knowledge and improve morale.

There was an acknowledgement that any form of leadership preparation is incremental. Respondents were not under any false illusions, knowing that participants would not emerge from a course fully armed with all the necessary skills and knowledge, but it would provide an opportunity for them to construct new knowledge. Respondents believed that the specific outcome from this form of preparation should be a pipeline of primary deputy principals possessing improved confidence, willingness and motivation towards principalship. This should result in greater respondent satisfaction and skill development, in turn resulting in leadership developmental growth (see Figure 1) among respondents.

Conclusion

This research revealed a majority of primary deputies in this study tacitly and explicitly reinforcing existing routines, failing to look at what leadership they currently exercise from a new perspective thus losing the opportunity to reconceptualise their role to become agents of change. Ireland's primary deputy principals continue to undertake many different duties which causes the role to lack a clearly defined list of duties and responsibilities. Ireland's

deputy principals view the principalship in the same way as their counterparts from other countries commenting on similar incentives and barriers involved in taking up this multi-faceted job. The suggested framework for principalship preparation, the first of its kind in Ireland, focuses on the relevant operational aspects of principalship not encountered in deputyship to be achieved through both a formal course and personal individualised mentorship.

References

Allen, T. (2003). *Two 'Heads' are Better Than One: An Examination and Analysis of the Role of the Deputy Principal in Irish Primary Schools*. Unpublished Master of Education Dissertation: National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

Armstrong, D. (2005). Leadership at the crossroads: Negotiating challenges, tensions and ambiguities in the transition from teaching to the vice-principalship. In: D. Armstrong (ed.) *Examining the Practice of School Administration in Canada*. Calgary, Alberta: Detselig Enterprises, 113–128.

Boskin, M.J. (1974). A Conditional Logit Model of Occupational Choice. *The Journal of Political Economy*, 82(2), 389-398.

Brundrett, M. (2001). The Development of School Leadership Preparation Programs in England and the USA: A comparative analysis. *Education Management, Administration and Leadership*, 29(2), 229–245.

Browne-Ferrigno, T. (2003). Becoming a principal: Role conception, initial socialization, role-identity transformation, purposeful engagement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(4), 468–503.

Bush, T. (2011). *Theories of educational leadership and management*. Fourth Edition. London: Sage.

Bush, T., Bell, L., and Middlewood, D. (eds.) (2010). *The Principles of Educational Leadership and Management. Second Edition*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Caldwell, B., and Spinks, J. (1998). *Beyond the self-managing school*. London: Falmer.

Chi-Kin Lee, J., Kwan, P., and Walker, A. (2009). Vice-principalship: their responsibility, roles and career aspirations. *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*, 12(2), 187-207.

Clarke, S., Wildy, H., and Pepper, C. (2007). Connecting Preparation with Reality: Primary Principals' Experiences of their first year out in Western Australia. *Leading and Managing*, 13(1), 81-90.

Cowie, M., and Crawford, M. (2007). Principal preparation – Still an act of faith? *School Leadership and Management*, 27(2), 129-146.

Cranston, N. (2007). Through the eyes of potential aspirants: Another view of the principalship. *School Leadership and Management*, 27(2), 109-128.

Cranston, N., Tromans, C., and Reugebrink, M. (2004). Forgotten leaders: What do we know about the deputy principalship in secondary schools? *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 7(3), 225-242.

Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five traditions*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Crow, G.M. (2004). *School Leader Preparation: A short review of the knowledge base*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

Crowley, M. (2006). *School Leadership: An Examination of the Role of the Irish Primary School Principal in a Period of Change and Rationalisation*. Unpublished doctorate thesis: University of Hull.

Day, R., and Allen, T.D. (2002). The relationship between career motivation and self-efficacy with protégé career success. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64(1), 72-91.

Day, C., Hall, C., Gammage, P., and Coles, M. (1993). *Leadership and curriculum in the primary school: The roles of senior and middle management*. London: Paul Chapman.

Day, C., and Leithwood, K. (eds.) (2007). *Successful Principal Leadership in Times of Change: An International Perspective*. The Netherlands: Springer.

Department of Education (1965). *Rules for National Schools under the Direction of the Department of Education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education (1973). Circular 16/73. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Draper, J., and McMichael, P. (1998). Making Sense of Primary Headship. *School Leadership and Management*, 18(2), 197-211.

Duncan, D. (1995). *Mature Women Entrants to Teaching: A case study*. Unpublished doctorate thesis: University of Warwick.

Earley, P., and Weindling, D. (2004). *Understanding School Leadership*. London: Sage.

Earley, P., and Weindling, D. (2007). Do School Leaders Have a Shelf Life? Career stages and headteacher performance. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 35(1), 73-88.

Fidler, B. (1997). Building on Success: Professional Development in the Future. In: H. Tomlinson (ed.) *Managing continuing professional development in schools*. London: Paul Chapman.

Fidler, B., and Atton, T. (2004). *The Headship Game*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Fullan, M., and Hargreaves, A. (1996). *What's Worth Fighting for in your School?* New York: Teachers College Press.

Glanz, J. (2004). *The Assistant Principal's Handbook: Strategies for Success*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.

Good, R. (2008). Sharing the secrets. *Principal Leadership*, 8(8), 46-50.

Gray, D.E. (2004). *Doing Research in the Real World*. London: Sage.

Greenfield, W.D. (1985). Studies of the Assistant Principalship: Toward New Avenues of Inquiry. *Education and Urban Society*, 18(1), 7-27.

Gronn, P. (2003). *The New Work of Educational Leaders: Changing Leadership Practice in an Era of School Reform*. London: Sage.

Gronn, P. (2000). Distributed Properties: A New Architecture for Leadership. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 28(3), 317-338.

Gronn, P., and Rawlings-Sanaei, F. (2003). Recruiting Schools Principals in a Climate of Leadership Disengagement. *Australian Journal of Education*, 46(2), 172-184.

Gross, H.A., Shapiro, M. and Meehan, J. (1980). How the Management Team Concept can Succeed. *NASSP Bulletin*, 64(436), 26-28.

Hale, E.L., and Moorman, H.N. (2003). *Preparing School Principals: A National Perspective on Policy and Program Innovations*. Washington, D.C: Institute for Educational Leadership, Illinois Education Research Council.

Hallinger, P. (2003). Leading Educational Change: Reflections on the practice of instructional and transformational leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33(3), 329-351.

Hallinger, P., and Heck, R.H. (1998). Exploring the Principal's Role in Effectiveness. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32(10), 5-44.

Hallinger, P., and Snidvongs, K. (2005). Adding Value to School Leadership and Management: A review of trends in the development of managers in the education and business sectors. (Online) Available at: www.ncsl.org.uk/publications (Accessed: 19 April 2011).

Harris, A. (2002). *School Improvement: What's in it for Schools?* London: Falmer Press.

Harris, A. and Townsend, A. (2007). Developing Leaders for Tomorrow: Releasing System Potential. *School Leadership and Management*, 27(2), 167-177.

Harvey, M. and Sheridan, B. (1995). Measuring the perception of the primary school deputy principal's responsibilities. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 33(4), 69-91.

Hatcher, R. (2005). The Distribution of Leadership and Power in Schools. *British Journal of Sociology in Education*, 26(2), 253-267.

House, R.J., Hanges, P.J., Javidan, M, Dorfman, P.W., and Gupta, V. (eds.) (2004). *Culture, leadership and organizations: The GLOBE study of 32 societies*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Jossey-Bass Inc. (2000). *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership*. First Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Kelly, G. (1987). The assistant principal as a training ground for the principalship. *NASSP Bulletin*, 71(501), 13-20.

Leadership Development for Schools (2007). *Improving School Leadership. Country Background Report for OECD Activity*. Clare: Clare Education Centre.

Leithwood, K.A., and Riehl, C. (2003). *What we Know about Successful School Leadership*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

Lincoln, Y.S., and Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry.* Newbury Park, California: Sage.

Long, F. (2008). Protocols of Silence in Educational Discourse. *Irish Educational Studies*, 27(2), 121-132.

Lumby, J. (2013). Distributed Leadership: The Uses and Abuses of Power. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 41(5), 581-597.

McEwan, E.W. (2003). *Seven Steps to Effective Instructional Leadership*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.

Máirtín, C. (ed.) (2007). *Gioraíonn Beirt Bóthar*. Cork: IPPN.

Marshall, C., and Hooley, R. (2006). *The Assistant Principal: Leadership Choices and Challenges*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.

Mayrowetz, D. (2008). Making Sense of Distributed Leadership: Exploring the Multiple Usages of the Concept in the Field. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44, 424-435.

Mertz, N.T. (2006). The organizational socialisation of assistant principals. *Journal of School Leadership*, 16(6), 644-675.

Muijs, D., and Harris, A. (2003). Assistant and Deputy Heads: Key leadership issues and challenges. *Management in Education*, 17(6).

Mulford, B. (2008). *The Leadership Challenge: Improving learning in schools*. Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research.

OECD (2008). *Improving school leadership: Comparative report*. November 2007. Draft (unpublished).

Oleszewski, A., Shoho, A., and Barnett, B. (2012). The development of assistant principals: a literature review. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 50(3), 264-286.

Porter, J.J. (1996). What is the Role of the Middle Level Assistant Principal, and How Should it Change? *NASSP Bulletin*, 80(578), 25-30.

Read, S.P. (2012). Factors that Influence the Preparedness of Teachers for the Vice Principal Role. In: A.R. Shoho, B.G. Barnett and A.K. Tooms (eds.) *Examining the Assistant Principalship*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing Inc.

Reeves, D.B. (2006). *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Ribbins, P. (2008). A life and career based framework for the study of leaders in education: Problems, possibilities and prescriptions. In: J. Lumby, G. Crow and P. Pashiardis (eds.) *International Handbook on the Preparation and Development of School Leaders*. New York; Oxon: Routledge, 61-80.

Ruwoldt, M.J. (2006). *To Lead or not to Lead: That is the Question. An Exploration of Understandings of Leadership in the Context of the Deputy Principal in the Lutheran Secondary School.* Unpublished doctorate thesis: Australian Catholic University.

Sarantakos, S. (2005). *Social Research*. Third Edition. New York: Palgreave.

Scoggins, A.J., and Bishop, H.L. (1993). *A Review of the Literature Regarding the Roles and Responsibilities of the Assistant Principal*. New Orleans, Louisiana: Mid-South Educational Research Organization.

Senge, P.M. (2000). Give me a Lever Long Enough... and Single-handed I can Move the World. In: Jossey-Bass Inc. *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership*. First Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 13-25.

Smith, J.M. (1987). Assistant Principals: New Demands, New Realities, and New Perspectives. *NASSP Bulletin*, 71(501), 9-12.

Spillane, J. (2006). *Distributed Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Super, D.E. (1953). A theory of vocational development. *American Psychologist*, 8, 185-190.

Taysum, A. (2010). *Evidence Informed Leadership in Education*. London: Contunuum.

Thomson, P. (2009). *School Leadership – Heads on the Block*. London: Routledge.

Tobin, G.A., and Begley, C.M. (2004). Methodological rigour within a qualitative framework. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 48(4), 388-396.

Tripkin, P.M. (2006). *The assistant principalship: Becoming a school administrator*. Unpublished doctorate thesis. New York: Fordham University.

Ummanel, A. (2012). *School principals' career path: Ireland, Cyprus and Malta sample*. Unpublished D.Ed. Thesis: Dublin City University.

Wahlstrom, K., and Louis, K. (2008). How Teachers Experience Principal Leadership: The Roles of Professional Community, Trust, Efficacy, and Shared Responsibility. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), 458-495.

Walker, A., and Kwan, P. (2009). Linking Professional, School, Demographic, and Motivational Factors to Desire for Principalship. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 45(4), 590-615.

Weller, L.D., and Weller, S.J. (2002). *The Assistant Principal: Essentials for Effective School Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.

Winter, P.A. (2002). *Applicant Attraction to Assistant Principal Jobs: An Experimental Assessment*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA), Pittsburgh, PA, November.

Irish Teachers' Journal

Volume 2, Number 1
November 2014

CONTENTS

1 Editorial *Sheila Nunan, General Secretary*

5 Author Notes

7 Curriculum politics and practice: from 'implementation' to 'agency'. *Anne Looney*

15 The challenge of supporting literacy in a digital age: perspectives of Irish primary school teachers. *Duncan McCarthy and Brian Murphy*

32 An exploration of formative assessment practices on children's academic efficacy. *Carol Constant and Tracey Connolly*

47 An evaluation of the utility of homework in Irish primary school classrooms. *Joanne Jackson and Lorraine Harbison*

63 The challenges, dilemmas and opportunities associated with implementing inclusion in an Irish primary school: the school stakeholders' perspective. *Conor Mulcahy*

73 Nationalism, prejudice and intercultural education. *Anne Horan*

85 Becoming a primary school principal in Ireland: deputy principalship as preparation. *Derek Grant*

into
Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Vere Foster House
35 Parnell Sqsuare
Dublin 1

Telephone: 01 804 7700
Email: info@into.ie
Web: www.into.ie
Mobile web: m.into.ie

General Secretary: Sheila Nunan

Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann
Áras Vere Foster
35 Cearnóg Pharnell
Baile Átha Cliath 1

Guthán: 01 804 7700
Ríomhphost: info@into.ie
Gréasán: www.into.ie
Suíomh móibíleach: m.into.ie

Árd Rúnaí: Sheila Nunan

IRISH TEACHERS' JOURNAL, Volume 2, Number 1, November 2014. ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print). ISSN: 2009-6879 (Online).

The *Irish Teachers' Journal* (www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/IrishTeachersJournal) is a peer-reviewed journal published annually by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, Vere Foster House, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin 1.

The journal is distributed to all primary schools in the Republic of Ireland and primary and post primary schools in Northern Ireland.

It is also available as a free download from the publications section of the INTO website at www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/IrishTeachersJournal.

Copyright information

Copyright © 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, transmitted, or disseminated, in any form, or by any means, without prior permission from INTO, to whom all requests to reproduce copyright material should be directed.

The INTO grants authorisation for individuals to use copyright material for private research activities, classroom or organisational instruction and related organisational activities, student assignments or as part of a scholarly, educational or cultural presentation or workshop.

The INTO allows use of links to facilitate access to the online version of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. The journal may be downloaded to view, use or display on computer or personal digital device.

Enquiries to Education Section, INTO, Vere Foster House, 35 Parnell Square, Dublin 1. Email: info@into.ie. Tel: 00353 (0) 1 8047700.

For more information please visit: www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/IrishTeachersJournal.

Submitting a paper to the Irish Teachers' Journal

For information about writing an article, preparing your manuscript and general guidance for authors please contact the Education Section of the INTO at tel: 00353 (0) 1 8047700 or email: info@into.ie or visit: www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/IrishTeachersJournal.

It is a condition of publication that authors assign copyright or licence the publication rights in their articles, including abstracts, to the INTO. Authors themselves are responsible for obtaining permission to reproduce copyright material from other sources.

Disclaimer: The INTO make every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the 'Content') contained in our publications. However, the INTO make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by the INTO. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. The INTO shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

Editorial

The INTO is delighted to publish the second edition of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. The journal was launched in 2013 for the first time, to provide an opportunity to teachers to bring their research findings to a broad audience. The purpose of the journal is to stimulate thinking and reflection on current educational issues among the teaching profession.

The INTO's strong tradition of being both a trade union and a professional organisation for teachers – primary teachers in the Republic of Ireland and nursery, primary and post-primary teachers in Northern Ireland – places the Organisation in a good position to facilitate and provide a means of expression of teachers' collective opinion on matters affecting the interests of education and of the teaching profession, as per the *INTO Rules and Constitution*. The publication of a teachers' journal provides an additional vehicle for the voice of the profession to contribute to current debate in education. Articles written by teachers, for teachers, demonstrate a commitment to professional engagement that is at the core of teacher professionalism in Ireland.

As Ireland's economy begins to grow again following a sustained period of decline the time for re-investing in education has come. There are many priorities including class size, leadership, special education, disadvantage and small schools. Education cutbacks have taken their toll. Child poverty is on the increase. Class sizes are bigger – one in four children is in a class of 30 or more children. Inclusion is under threat due to a lack of resources. Nevertheless, teachers remain committed to their profession. Their commitment to the moral purpose of teaching is resilient, as they seek to improve the educational experience of their pupils. Teachers continue to enhance their own professionalism through their engagement with school self-evaluation, self-reflection, and professional development. Teachers are participating in the piloting of new induction and probation models. Teachers are working with colleges of education to enhance the experience of student teachers on school placement. Teachers continue to engage with educational change endeavouring to shape developments to ensure educational changes are in the best interests of pupils and of the profession. The *Irish Teachers' Journal* is an acknowledgement of the high regard in which teaching is held in Ireland. The contributors to this journal illustrate teachers' motivation to enhance their knowledge of teaching, thereby ensuring that teaching continues to be an attractive profession.

Following an open invitation to members, the INTO received a number of articles for consideration for the journal. All articles were reviewed by external experts who provided constructive feedback to the authors. Authors resubmitted their articles having taken on board reviewers' feedback. The INTO invited Dr Anne Looney, Chief Executive of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), to write the guest article. Dr Looney has extensive experience in curriculum development in Ireland and is currently on sabbatical leave having taken up a position for the current academic year as a Professorial Research Fellow in the Learning Sciences Institute in Australia.

✉ Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

In her article, Dr Looney describes the complexity of curriculum development. She outlines how curriculum can become a political battleground in some countries and is not a linear process of curriculum design followed by implementation. How students experience curriculum may often differ from curriculum aims. She argues that there is less political influence on curriculum matters in Ireland, due to the existence of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment which has a brief to advise the minister on curricular policy. The NCCA is a representative structure which is not true of curriculum councils in other countries. Dr Looney explores some of the criticisms of this approach to curriculum and outlines other forms of consultation involving teachers in classrooms, for example working with a network of schools and www.curriculumonline.ie. Now that the Primary School Curriculum (1999) is being revised, Dr Looney's article makes for interesting reading in how curriculum comes about.

In addition to the guest article, this edition of the journal contains six articles written by teachers, addressing six topics of relevance to teachers today. It is not surprising that literacy, assessment and homework feature as these are issues that impact on all class teachers today. The other three articles focus on whole school issues – special education, intercultural education and leadership – aspects of education that impact on a whole school.

Duncan McCarthy and Brian Murphy write about the perspectives of Irish teachers in supporting literacy in a digital age. They outline new understandings of literacy and describe online reading strategies. They highlight the challenge of making classroom literacy meaningful in a digital age. Their small scale study of approaches to digital literacy among a group of teachers provides the data for his description of current practices and the identification of barriers to creating effective digital literacy classrooms. It is clear from this study that there is policy-practice gap and they suggest investment in teacher professional development.

Carol Constant and Tracey Connolly explore formative assessment practices on children's academic efficacy. In their article, they outline the current policy position regarding assessment and current understandings of formative assessment. Their own research focused on investigating and developing formative assessment strategies in primary school classrooms from a practical perspective. They carried out a pre-intervention and a post-intervention study, with a view to studying the impact of the introduction of formative assessment practices in a classroom on pupil learning, particularly pupils' academic efficacy, motivation and eagerness to learn. They conclude that formative assessment practices can have a positive impact on pupils' academic efficacy and eagerness to learn.

The utility of homework in Irish primary school classrooms is the topic of the third article. Joanne Jackson, with Lorraine Harbison, examines current practice and the effectiveness of administering homework in Irish primary schools. A brief overview of the literature on homework is provided. A questionnaire was issued to a convenience sample of 90 parents seeking their views on homework and the findings of this questionnaire are presented. An interesting finding is that parents are not always aware of a school's policy on homework. Of some concern, perhaps, is the finding that a high percentage of parents express the view that homework can cause friction in the family. This is an interesting study that provides some food for thought for primary teachers.

The realities of inclusion in a small primary school are presented in Conor Mulcahy's article. Conor carried out a small scale study which explored the perspectives of school leaders, teachers and special needs assistants in relation to the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. He outlines the challenges, the dilemmas and the opportunities in relation to inclusion. He highlights the challenges teachers experience in adopting a policy of inclusion, particularly the changing of attitudes over time. He also refers to dilemmas around the use of resources and suggests that professional development for teachers in relation to inclusion provide opportunities to enhance the educational experience of all children.

Anne Horan's article offers an interesting perspective on intercultural education. She introduces her article by outlining the changing educational landscape in Ireland. She describes current initiatives such as the publication of intercultural guidelines and language supports and acknowledges their limitations. She draws on the ideas of cultural nationalism, cultural pluralism and the works of Herder, a German philosopher of the 18th century, to help explain some of the challenges experienced by Irish society, including teachers, in addressing interculturalism. As Ireland becomes a more diverse society, reflected also in the school population, Anne's articles provides some thought-provoking ideas about culture, nationalism and intercultural education.

The final article addresses school leadership, focusing specifically on the experiences of deputy principals. Derek Grant explores the roles of principals and deputy principals in management and leadership in schools. His study examined, through interviews, deputy principals' construction of school leadership. Derek argues that little attention has been paid to the role of deputy principal and to preparation for principalship. He offers three typologies of the deputy-principals' role and suggests a more planned and structured approach to the transition from deputy principal to principal. At a time when school leaders face increasing workloads, Derek offers interesting perspectives regarding the potential of the deputy principal's role.

Articles in this journal reflect the views and opinions of the authors, and not those of the INTO. All authors have provided stimulating thoughts and ideas for the consideration of their teaching colleagues. The INTO is delighted to provide an opportunity to teachers to bring the fruits of their research to a broad audience through the publication of the *Irish Teachers' Journal*. Teachers' engagement in further study and high-quality research can only enrich discussions and professional conversations among teachers. The INTO wishes to thank all teachers who contributed articles, and hopes that many more teachers will do so in the coming years.

Sheila Nunan
General Secretary

Author Notes

Anne Looney

Dr Anne Looney has been CEO of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Dublin for over a decade. Prior to joining the NCCA, she worked as a post-primary teacher of religious education and English. She is a graduate of the Mater Dei Institute in Dublin and holds a Doctorate in Education from the Institute of Education in London. She has published on assessment policy, citizenship education, education and school policy, and school values and ethos. Among other recent work, she delivered Ireland's inaugural World Teachers' Day lecture, and participated in an OECD external review team. Anne is currently on a sabbatical year in Australia.

Duncan McCarthy and Brian Murphy

Duncan Mc Carthy is a mainstream primary school teacher. In 2012, he graduated with a Masters in Education from University College Cork, where his research explored literacy development in the digital age. He has presented this work at a number of conferences including those organised by the Reading Association of Ireland and Educational Studies Association of Ireland. Duncan's research interests include literacy, continuous professional development and integrating technology into the learning environment.

Dr Brian Murphy is a senior lecturer in the School of Education, UCC where he is course leader for the new Professional Masters in Education initial teacher education course. His research interests are in the areas of policy and pedagogy in the language and literacy areas.

Carol Constant and Tracey Connolly

Carol Constant is a teacher in Cork. Carol completed her B.Ed. in Mary Immaculate College and was awarded an INTO bursary for her M.Ed. research which she undertook at University College Cork.

Dr Tracey Connolly is a lecturer at the school of education, University College Cork. Tracey's research areas are assessment practices in education, inclusive education and the history of Irish education.

Joanne Jackson and Lorraine Harbison

Joanne Jackson is an honours graduate from the Church of Ireland College of Education. She teaches in St Andrew's NS, Lucan. Joanne's educational interests are special needs and the arts curriculum. She is currently involved with the CRAFTed Art Programme.

Dr Lorraine Harbison is a graduate from St Patrick's College and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. She lectures in mathematics education and ICT in CICE. Her research interests involve promoting mathematical understanding for all.

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

Conor Mulcahy

Conor Mulcahy is a primary school teacher in Cork City. He holds a B.A. in English and History, Higher Diploma in Primary Education, and is currently an M.Ed student in University College Cork.

Anne Horan

Anne Horan is from Glin, Co Limerick, and is a teaching principal in a three teacher school in Carrickerry, Co Limerick. Her educational qualifications include a B.Ed, B.A., M.Ed. and a Post Graduate diploma in the teaching of primary science. She is a Doctoral student in St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. Anne's area of interest is intercultural education, and the experiences of immigrant (newcomer) children and their families within our educational system.

Derek Grant

Dr Derek Grant graduated from Trinity College Dublin with a first class honours degree in education (2002). He was conferred with the degree of Master in Education Management from the University of Ulster (2009). He holds a Doctorate in Educational Research and Development from the University of Lincoln, England (2013). As part of this degree, Derek completed research on the role of the deputy principal and principal in Irish primary schools set within the paradigms of role theory and distributed leadership. He is currently a teaching principal in Kilmore Central NS, Cavan.

Curriculum politics and practice: from 'implementation' to 'agency'

ANNE LOONEY

Abstract

In recent times, the school curriculum has become something of a political battleground across a number of countries. This paper looks at the complex and fraught relationships between the school curriculum and government in England, Wales and Australia, before looking at the Republic of Ireland. To map these relationships, three different perspectives on curriculum (from the myriad available in curriculum scholarship) are used – the technical, the process and the practice.

> *Nothing appeals to a politician so much as the chance to rewrite a curriculum. He would not dare operate on a brain tumour or land a jumbo jet or design the Forth Bridge. But let him near a classroom, and the Jupiter complex takes over. He goes berserk. Any fool can teach, and the existing fools are no good at it. Napoleon might lose the battle of Waterloo, but he reformed the French curriculum. (Jenkins, 2010)*

The curriculum battleground

In recent times, the school curriculum has become something of a political battleground across a number of countries. Simon Jenkins, quoted above, was writing about the situation in England, and the very particular perspectives of the then secretary of state for education, Michael Gove, but his observations reflect an all too recognisable scenario in developed education systems. This paper will look at the complex and fraught relationships between the school curriculum and government in England, Wales and Australia, before looking at the Republic of Ireland. To map these relationships, three different perspectives on curriculum (from the myriad available in curriculum scholarship) will be used – the technical, the process and the practice.

Originally, curriculum was seen as the product of a technical planning process. Ralph Tyler, writing in 1949, suggested that the construction of a curriculum was simply a matter of choosing and organising the subject matter that comprises any school or college programme of study. This technical view of curriculum continues to have influence and is particularly appealing to policy makers and to the comment lines of talk radio when debate on a bewildering array of problems inevitably arrives at the seemingly obvious and simple solution to 'put it on the curriculum.'

This view is underpinned by a belief that policies are 'implemented' and turn out as intended, and that curriculum 'problems' arise because teachers and other social actors

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

don't follow the instructions they have been given. Such a view ignores the fact that intentions are one of the most inconsistent predictors of the results of policies. The same is true of curriculum. Curriculum aims are rarely a good guide to curriculum experiences. While some technical work is required in the making of curriculum, above all, curriculum is a social construct, and that task of social construction applies to both the written curriculum (provided by governments or other agencies) and the enacted curriculum (experienced by students in classrooms or other educational settings).

This social and constructed dimension of curriculum has been the subject of much scholarly reflection and debate. On one side we have those who believe that the purpose of curriculum and of schooling is knowledge. This is the specialist role of the school, and the university. Historically, such scholars connect with the origins of curriculum in Christianity and Islam as sacred knowledge, which evolved into the secular disciplines of the university system and on to shape school subjects. On the other side are the followers of Rousseau and Dewey, who believe that the purpose of the curriculum is to support learning and the role of the teacher to facilitate that learning through engagement with knowledge and specialist disciplines but also with engagement with everyday experience. Among their number are the optimistic digital evangelists, who believe that, suitably supported, learners can learn what and when they like. They stand accused by their opposite numbers of 'learnification' and downgrading knowledge. In turn, our proponents of knowledge stand accused of elitism in the face of an explosion of knowledge and increased accessibility to knowledge.

However, as Goodson (1998, 1999) has noted, these perennial debates in curriculum scholarship have often resulted in complex analyses that can be far removed from classroom practice: one of the perennial problems of studying curriculum is that it is a multifaceted concept constructed, negotiated and re-negotiated at a variety of levels and in a variety of arenas. This elusiveness has no doubt contributed to the rise to theoretical and overarching perspectives – psychological, philosophical, sociological – as well as more technical or scientific paradigms. But these perspectives and paradigms have been criticised recently because they do violence to the practical essentials of curriculum as conceived of and realised (Goodson, 1989, p1).

Elliott (1998) also emphasises the need to move beyond a technical view, but also asserts the importance of the student experience of curriculum noting that: "...Mere changes in syllabus content do not require fundamental pedagogical change but curriculum change based on a fundamental re-appraisal of the nature of school knowledge does, since it implies a new way of representing knowledge to the student" (p22).

For Elliott, curriculum is 'the language of education'. Drawing on Bruner he sees the teacher as a 'human event' not a 'transmission device'.

Similarly, Maxine Greene (1971) developed a dual notion of curriculum that included classroom practice and classroom practitioners. However, she went further. She described the dominant view of curriculum as socially presented knowledge to be mastered by the learner but proposed a view of curriculum as "a possibility for the learner as an existing person mainly concerned with making sense of his own life world" (1971, p. 3). Thus three different perspectives emerge. The first, the technical view proposed by Tyler and his followers, sees curriculum as product – the course or programme of study to be published.

In Goodson's analysis, and that of Elliott, curriculum is a complex process, socially constructed and inclusive of the enacted curriculum in classrooms. Recognising the product and process dimensions, Greene goes further and proposes a view of curriculum as practice.

The 'line of command' in curriculum battles

In a lecture delivered in Edinburgh in May 2014, Robin Alexander, who led the *Cambridge Review of Primary Education in England*, traced the fraught relationship between the school curriculum and central government in England. He delivered the lecture at the height of the controversy about what he called the 'neo-Victorian' curriculum reforms introduced in England in September 2014. He recalls the declaration of George Tomlinson, the minister for education in Clement Atlee's government, that "Minister knows nowt about curriculum". He considers his own experience as teacher in the 1960s working from a handbook with the cautious title *Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers and Others Concerned with the Work of Primary Schools*. Commenting on the current scenario in England he notes that Minister Gove "removed the remaining checks and balances on absolute ministerial power, ensuring that nothing obstructed the line of command between his office and the schools" (2014, p 2). The agency which previously had the responsibility for the curriculum, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), was abolished in 2012.

Much has been written since the departure of Michael Gove from his post in education about his particular perspective on the school curriculum and how it should be determined and about his government's policy of a 'line of command' for some schools and a 'freedom' for academies and other free schools from the requirements of the new curriculum, even if these schools are reluctant to embrace them (see http://news.tes.co.uk/b/news/2014/03/10/academies-shun-freedoms-available-to-them-survey-shows.aspx). This line of command model is obviously associated with a technical view of curriculum and of the curriculum development process. The latter is relatively straightforward. Curriculum is 'produced' and then 'implemented' in classrooms by teachers.

The story of England's curriculum wars is mirrored elsewhere. In Wales for example, in March 2014, the Welsh assembly minister Hew Lewis appointed the former chief inspector in Scotland to lead a review of its national curriculum – early years, primary and post primary. The review was ordered by the minister after the poor PISA performance of Welsh students in December 2013 which he claimed was the result of decades of "denial, drift and dither" (www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/pisa-results-alarming-declines-core-6364784). Of note, in 2006 the equivalent of the QCA in Wales, Awdurdod Cymwysterau, Cwricwlwm ac Asesu Cymru (ACCAC), had been abolished and its functions merged with the Department for Education and Children.

Further afield, similar 'lines of command' are being established between Government and the school curriculum. In Australia, the emerging national curriculum, developed by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Agency (ACARA) over six years and supported by state and national consultation, was heavily criticised by the newly elected liberal government in 2013. Earlier this year, the Australian minister for education, Christopher Pyne, appointed two individuals with strong links to the new government to review

the curriculum following controversies about the particular focus on Australia in Asia, on sustainability and on indigenous history across the new curriculum. In announcing the appointments, the minister made the following observation; "I'm getting people to objectively review the National Curriculum to ensure that it is robust, and to ensure that it puts students' results first, that the priority is on outcomes and everyone in education... well everyone has been to school... everyone is an expert on education in one way or another... almost 40% of many of the populations in capital cities have been to school, have been to universities, and they're also experts on university education".

In responding to the announcement of the review, the chair of ACARA, Professor Barry McGaw, wrote to the review team, defending the vigorous processes adopted by ACARA in work to date and the consultation and analysis undertaken. He opened the letter thus: "The school curriculum expresses a nation's aspirations for its next generations. The curriculum must strike a balance between developing young people's understanding of their national history and culture and preparing them for a future that is increasingly global and largely unpredictable".

"What constitutes essential school learning will always be contested because behind it is a debate about what knowledge is of most worth. Curriculum stirs the passions – and that is a good thing. Curriculum is never completed. It is never perfect and should always be a work in progress. As responsible citizens, we are obliged to provide our future generations with the best possible learning opportunities and outcomes." (McGaw, 2014).

McGaw's letter is of note for its efforts to reclaim curriculum making as a public rather than party political project. Of note, he is clear that curriculum making is a political process, but a process and responsibility that reaches well beyond government ministers. In England, Wales and Australia, current reviews of curriculum are very much party political projects. Independent or autonomous organisations or agencies with responsibility for curriculum (such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] in Ireland) have been abolished or sidelined in the process.

An Irish battleground? The role of the NCCA

Compared with recent and current events in England, Wales and Australia, the curriculum in Ireland appears more resistant to direct intervention by politicians. Although, as evidenced in ongoing debates about the status of history in post-primary education, compulsory Irish in senior cycle, and mathematics at all phases of education, curriculum inspires plenty of strong opinions and comment. The absence of direct intervention is due in no small degree to the continued existence of the NCCA which has the brief to advise the minister for education and skills on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education and for primary and post-primary schools (Government of Ireland, 1998, p.38). The council is representative in composition – teacher unions, management bodies, parents' organisations, industry and business interests and was established on a statutory basis in July 2001 following earlier establishment as the Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board (CEB) in 1984 and the NCCA in 1987.

Until the CEB, curriculum development had been a highly centralised and "sometimes mysterious process" (Granville, 2004) based in the Department of Education. The representative

structure of the NCCA continues to be unique, certainly among English speaking education systems. Thus, for example, the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA) discussed earlier, shares much of the same remit of the NCCA, but is not representative in composition. As Granville notes, this structure is reflective of the model of social partnership in use in Ireland for social and economic planning and development in the last decades of the 20th century. He does not see it as completely apolitical, suggesting that all of these competing interests are interested in promoting or protecting their own interests in addition to, or perhaps even through, developing curriculum and assessment (ibid). Gleeson suggests that teacher unions and management bodies "effectively control the NCCA and its committees". (2004, p 116). This less positive view of partnership is not confined to Ireland. Gewirtz and Ozga (1990) are similarly sceptical about the partnership rhetoric. They are critical of a nostalgic, naïve view of partnership that sees it as a pluralist idyll they are keen to shatter in declaring that "an essential element of pluralism is that power is distributed, and that politics is a process of bargaining between interest groups and between groups and government" (1990, p.38). A strong partnership rhetoric, they suggest, can mask a "policy elite" and a "closed policy community". (ibid.p.47).

Sugrue (2004) takes a similar critical perspective but, in the case of the development of the 1999 curriculum, suggests that the involvement and engagement of INTO representatives and nominees in the processes and structures allowed for strong teacher ownership of that curriculum and a strong professional buy-in as a consequence. He quotes the comment of the then INTO general secretary Joe O'Toole who contrasts the 1971 curriculum with the 'new' 1999 curriculum, which, suggested O'Toole, had been developed by NCCA committees "driven, guided and influenced by working teachers". (1999, quoted in Sugrue, 2004, p 182).

Despite the shortcomings of the partnership and representative structure, the existence of the NCCA ensures that the political 'line of command' is at worse more dispersed, and at best entirely displaced by a deliberative process that represents a more public engagement with curriculum development and a view of curriculum as process.

The coming of curriculum as practice

Fast forward to 2014, and to the current scenario in the NCCA where the structures remain as they were when the NCCA was established, with the additional practice of co-opting expertise where needed (NCCA, 2012). Two recent developments in how the NCCA works are of significance. The first arises from the observation in the NCCA's strategic plan for 2012-2015 that other voices and other ways of working challenge how the council is composed and how it works: "The presence of urgent and diverse voices in the education debate challenges the commitment of the NCCA to consult as widely as possible and its capacity to offer advice that represents a consensus view. In addition, the composition of the council is likely to come under increasing scrutiny from two sources. First, voices not represented on the council are increasingly active in pursuing membership, and second, the ability of a group that works on a consensus basis to continue to deliver effective and meaningful change will be carefully monitored by advocates of different approaches." (NCCA, 2012, p 7).

The intractable tension between attempts to reach consensus, and to consult and engage as widely as possible is acknowledged and identified as a potential weakness in the face of challenges from those 'advocates of different approaches' which, although not specified, seem likely to include more direct party political command.

The second significant recent development in the NCCA has been the practice of working directly with networks of teachers, schools, early years' practitioners and early years' settings as part of the curriculum process. The same strategic plan quoted above includes a specific commitment "to engage with learners, teachers, practitioners, parents and others to support innovation in schools and other educational settings" (ibid. p9). Two current examples include the Aistear Tutor Network, made up of teachers in the infant years from across the country using *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* with children, and the junior cycle school network of 48 schools breaking new ground in planning for and organising the first three years of post-primary schools.

This direct engagement, alongside the deliberative engagement with representatives and nominees, is an attempt to include curriculum as practice in the process of developing the national curriculum that represents, as McGaw says, a nation's aspirations for its children, but also sets the context for the professional work of teachers. Those teachers and others who participate in NCCA networks are seen as agents of curriculum development; their practice is valued, not as a site of curriculum 'implementation' but as a context for innovation. In an important paper published in 2009, *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools*, the NCCA set out the rationale for this new approach to its work: "In recent years, direct engagement with schools has enabled the NCCA to access the perspectives of teachers and schools on many dimensions of curriculum and assessment change. These are critical inputs and insights not only in the context of curriculum development but also in how to generate an effective model for leading and supporting change. The initiatives have valued teacher inquiry and insights by recognising teachers as generators of real knowledge about what works in teaching and learning and, as such, have brought teachers and their schools into the field of policy development and change in the area of curriculum and assessment. Appreciating the centrality of teachers to leading and supporting change involves continued work on initiatives directly with schools and placing a particular emphasis within that work on researching and consulting on leading and supporting change." (NCCA, 2009, p. 17). This rationale is clearly informed by the practice perspective on curriculum with its associated emphasis on teacher agency in any change and development process.

This approach has given rise to the NCCA's much debated online portal for all curriculum material – www.curriculumonline.ie. Ironically, the site initially appears to position itself within the technical paradigm by announcing that it is a new way of 'presenting' curriculum. However, closer examination shows the radical nature of the initiative. In curriculumonline, teacher agency is foregrounded. The clipboard function allows teachers to customise 'their' curriculum for classroom use. In the new junior cycle English specification, the first of the new junior cycle subjects introduced in 2014, examples of student work from the field of practice are included, together with the commentary and analysis of teachers. Thus the professional voice is given a place in the 'national curriculum'.

Debates around this new portal are continuing. Issues raised include the absence of a curriculum 'book' and the requirement for teachers to search and choose rather than just 'read'. 'Implementation' is not without supporters nor without appeal. However, initial responses to the clipboard function are positive, with primary teachers, in particular, already used to the online planning tool making ready use of its functions. Technical glitches remain to be ironed out but should not deflect from the significant principle being promoted of foregrounding professional curriculum practice, against a global trend of sidelining, even undermining it.

And they lived happily…?

In engaging with public lay audiences on curriculum issues I often use the description that curriculum is the set of stories that one generation chooses to tell the next. This image embraces the technical (the anthology of stories), the process (the choice, revision and choosing again) and the practice (storytelling) perspectives. That description will always generate a response. Most audiences will participate enthusiastically in a debate about which stories are more important and why, about who should choose and on what basis. When considered this way, as McGaw suggests, curriculum does indeed stir the passion. It explains, at least to some degree, why politicians cannot resist the temptation to re-write, re-form or re-build it.

Those stories arise from a form of moral contract between society, the state and education professionals and institutions with regard to the educational experiences of children and young people at particular stages of their lives. In recent years, the inclusion of the children and young people themselves as agents in that contract has added further complexity to the task of articulating that set of stories.

Yet much of our contemporary curriculum talk is presented in problematised terms. The curriculum is inevitably overcrowded, often irrelevant, not meeting the needs of low achievers/high achievers or non-achievers. It can be dismissed as old fashioned while at the same time subject to faddish change, and even as lacking in machismo, thus alienating and lowering the chances of educational success of young boys. In fact, increasingly, the curriculum is seen as almost something to be overcome in the life of the school rather than being its raison d'être! Thus teachers at all levels of the education system talk about their frustration at having to compromise on pedagogical or technological innovation in order to 'cover' the curriculum. This dystopian view is in marked contrast to the utopian promise of the curriculum to come – the nirvana of the 21st century curriculum, which always seems tantalisingly out of reach. This motivating curriculum, with its promise of a delicate balance of skills and knowledge, a focus on mastery mindsets, which promotes self-directed and autonomous learning in equal measure and supports child and teacher well-being, is the educational equivalent of *The Great Oz*. It is illusion, albeit a powerful and compelling one that drives us forward, but sometimes, blinds us to the achievements of the journey. The teacher voices in curriculumonline tell the story of the journey. It's a story that would terrify Napoleon, but one that deserves to be heard.

References

Alexander, R. (2014). *Evidence, Policy and the Reform of Primary Education: A cautionary tale*. The 2014 Godfrey Thomson Trust Lecture University of Edinburgh. Retrieved from: www.robinalexander.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Alexander-Edinburgh-140513.pdf

Elliott, J. (1998). *The Curriculum Experiment. Meeting the Challenge of Social Change*. Birmingham: Open University Press.

Gewirtz, S., and Ozga, J. (1990). Partnership, pluralism and education policy: a reassessment. *Journal of Education Policy*, 5, 1, 37-48.

Gleeson, J. (2004). Cultural politics and Irish post-primary curriculum. In Sugrue, C. (Ed.), *Curriculum and Ideology: Irish Experiences International Perpsectives* (pp 101-140). Dublin: The Liffey Press.

Goodson, I. (1989). Studying Curriculum. Towards a Social Constructivist Perspective. Occasional Paper No 44. *Curriculum Praxis*. Department of Secondary Education. University of Alberta. Retrieved from: www2.education.ualberta.ca/educ/sec/docs/Occasional Paper No. 44 - Goodson.pdf

Goodson, I. (1998). *The Making of Curriculum, Collected Essays*. London and Bristol: The Falmer Press.

Government of Ireland (1998). *Education Act*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Granville, G. (2004). Politics and Partnership in Curriculum Planning in Ireland. In Sugrue, C. (Ed.), *Curriculum and Ideology: Irish Experiences International Perpsectives* (pp 67-99). Dublin: The Liffey Press.

Greene, M. (1971). Curriculum and Consciousness. *Teachers College Record*, 73 (2), 253-270.

Jenkins, S. (2010, November 25). Napoleon Gove can dictate its terms but the school curriculum is bogus. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from www.theguardian.com

Luke, A. (2010). Will the Australian Curriculum up the intellectual ante in primary classrooms? *Professional Voice*, 8 (1), 41-47.

Mourshed, M., Chijioke, C., and Barber, M. (2010) How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better. Mc Kinsey.com. Retrieved from: http://mckinseyonsociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/How-the-Worlds-Most-Improved-School-Systems-Keep-Getting-Better_Download-version_Final.pdf

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009). *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools: Discussion Paper*. Dublin: NCCA. Retrieved from: www.ncca.ie/en/Publications/Consultative_Documents/Leading_and_Supporting_Change_in_Schools_A_Discussion_Paper.pdf

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2012). *Supporting the Strategic Plan 2012-2015: Structures and process*. Dublin: NCCA. Retrieved from: www.ncca.ie/en/About_Us/Boards-and-Development-Groups/Structures-and-Processes-.pdf

Sugrue, C. (Ed.) (2004). *Curriculum and Ideology. Irish Experiences International Perpsectives*. Dublin: The Liffey Press.

Tyler, R. (1949). *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (2013 Edition). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The challenge of supporting literacy in a digital age: perspectives of Irish primary school teachers

DUNCAN MCCARTHY AND BRIAN MURPHY

Abstract

Despite research promoting the benefits of explicitly supporting children in developing the key skills and strategies associated with online reading in order to develop as successful readers in a digital age, a significant gap between research and classroom practice exists. This paper explores the provision of support for digital literacy by teachers in mainstream Irish primary schools. The main focus was on understandings of literacy in a digital age and how teachers are currently supporting digital literacy. This qualitative small-scale study employed focus groups as a survey method to investigate teachers' perspectives and experiences. The findings highlight a continued overemphasis on the development of traditional print literacy skills, uncertainty over the place for digital literacy support, a growing home/school technology gap and key barriers to effective accommodation of technological advancements in classrooms. It is envisioned that the findings reported may have some contribution to make to the debate on effective support for literacy in a digital age.

Introduction and context

Society globally has undergone substantial change in recent years, typified by technological developments. The internet and other technologies have become very prominent in everyday life and have come to epitomise 21st century living. In this context, according to Leu et al. (2008), children themselves are extremely active online. However, despite Prensky (2001) going so far as to refer to children as 'digital natives', it would appear that they do not have adequately developed digital literacy skills (Dwyer, 2012). Therefore, to ensure that children are equipped with the skills essential for modern life, research suggests that schools should become learning environments where technology is actively embraced (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). Importantly, despite research indicating that children require explicit teaching in key digital literacy skills and strategies, internationally a significant gap exists between research and classroom practice and educators seem unsure how best to integrate technology into the literacy learning environment (Marsh, 2009).

This paper examines digital literacy support from an Irish perspective. It gives a voice to the teachers who are part of the primary school literacy learning environment and therefore best placed to provide insights into current thinking, beliefs and practice at that level. Significantly, it attempts to understand digital literacy development in Irish schools by

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

situating it in the broader context of literacy development and examining if, where, and how it is reflected in the understandings of teachers.

New understandings of literacy

Recently, there has been a shift in the understanding of literacy because of the feeling that traditional literacy was failing children in this digital age due to changes in their literacy practices (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). In the new literacies framework, the definition of literacy has developed to accommodate many different literacies: digital literacy, media literacy, and computer literacy, as distinct from the traditional one dimensional understanding (Kennedy et. al, 2012; Merchant, 2009). Furthermore, literacy in this environment changes to a dynamic term that is constantly evolving and becoming literate can be considered a lifelong process (Perkins et al., 2011). It is thought provoking to suggest that educators are unsure what literacy practices the children currently beginning primary school will be engaging in when they leave, such is the speed with which technology is advancing (Dwyer, 2012; Leu et al., 2005). Research has called for a reappraisal of literacy development in schools and a movement from a traditional bottom up skills based model of literacy development to one where new literacies are appreciated and developed (Merchant, 2009). The claim is that conventional literacy learning, where lessons have focused predominantly on print media, relying on the use of books, magazines, newspapers and journals, is inadequate due to the emergence of alternative literacy landscapes (Leu, 2000b). Moreover, changes have been further fuelled by socio-cultural perspectives which consider the social aspects of literacy and embed literacy in culture and meaning (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). Attempts have been made to change the pedagogical approaches to the teaching of literacy from top-down teacher led lessons to lessons with a clear emphasis on cultural identity, learning by doing and collaboration to enhance deep learning (Street and Efstein, 2007; Gee, 2004). Hence, in such a classroom environment, literacy support begins with an acknowledgement of the literacy needs and interests of the child to ensure a meaningful learning environment.

Leu et al. (2008) propose that the process of reading online is now fundamental to participation in modern society and for the purpose of this research, digital literacy will be understood as the ability to immerse oneself in this process (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005). Notably, in the Irish context, Dwyer (2010) suggests that while print based reading and online reading share similar foundational skills, different skills, strategies and dispositions are required to successfully navigate the multimodal nature of online 'text'. Moreover, evidence suggests that effective traditional print readers are not always effective readers online (Leu et al., 2008) and that there are a number of specific skills one needs to negotiate a digital text including critically evaluating, searching and understanding multimodality (Dwyer, 2012; Coiro, 2009; Walsh, 2007; Leu et al., 2005).

Alternative literacy texts and the online reading strategies

The internet and other digital technologies are central to life in an information age, and are used by adults and children alike to search for information, develop understanding, and

communicate (Mc Gowan, 2005). With the onset of the internet, children are now sending and receiving emails, chatting with friends on social media forums, engaging in collaborative projects and searching for information online. As a result of the central role the internet plays in the daily lives of children, to nurture literacy effectively, the internet should be part of the very fabric of any understanding of what literacy is and integrated into the learning environment (Marsh, 2011; Kinzer, 2005; Mc Gowan, 2005). The key strategies associated with effective online reading are addressed in the sections which follow.

Critical literacy

It should be noted that children have always been required to be critical of the texts with which they have engaged (Mulcahy, 2010). However, the digital age has resulted in an even greater need for critical literacy as a fundamental literacy skill (Leu et al., 2005; Livingstone, 2004; Mc Kenna et. al, 1999). The very significant shift in control over the authenticity and hierarchical ownership of texts has been a key change. Furthermore, the quantity of nformation has increased exponentially because of a mass information explosion online. However, Mills (2010) highlights that those children who critically evaluate online information and have been taught how to are in the minority. On the basis of findings from their study, Coiro and Dobler (2007) were surprised by the lack of attention that even adolescents appeared to pay to the legitimacy of information on the websites they accessed.

In accordance with Luke and Freebody's (1990) model, through effective digital literacy pedagogy, children should be afforded the opportunities to develop critical thinking skills, moving from a passive to a critical consumption role (Handsfield et al., 2009). Teachers need to support children in the development of their understanding of bias, relevance and the importance of keeping information up to date (Livingstone, 2004). In this learning environment, children develop a better understanding of the nature of information; fit for purpose, verifiable, trustworthy and the techniques the author used to create it (Dobson and Willinsky, 2009; Coiro, 2007).

Searching

Investigations into child digital literacy practices suggest that children now access information most frequently on the internet (Moran et al., 2008). Hence, searching online has become a crucial skill when negotiating the internet and is one of the key online reading strategies (Dobson and Willinsky, 2009). However, Coiro and Dobler (2007) posit that children struggle with the independency of the navigation through different websites to find reliable information. They are unaware which search engines to use, how to generate search terms and which websites are most likely to provide pertinent information. To substantiate this point, Coiro (2009) claims that children are frequently guilty of immediately accessing the first suggestion provided by search engines in their quest for knowledge.

Therefore, teachers need to support children in familiarising themselves with the different search engines and the potential advantages and disadvantages of each (Leu et al., 2008). Furthermore, children need to be made aware of keywords during searching and how to choose the best search option by reading through the results (Dwyer, 2012). In order to fully comprehend how children engage with the fluid, open-ended and interactive online texts,

further research is required so that literacy instruction can be reviewed and move in line with 21st century learning.

Multimodality

New ways of 'reading' in digital spaces are challenging our understandings of what it means to be literate. Literacy has moved beyond the decoding of words (Sangiuliano, 2005), as multimodal online texts include words, pictures, audio and video clips in interactive and diverse digital spaces (Walsh, 2006; Mc Kenna et. al, 1999). Hence, these texts provide more than one way of making meaning, combining the visual, the gestural and the tactile (Pahl and Rowsell, 2006).

A common misconception in the traditional approach to reading development has maintained that elements such as pictures are inferior, and simply one of the steps towards meaningful literacy through words (Larson and Marsh, 2006; Millard and Marsh, 2001). However, it would appear that print can either be fundamental or peripheral in digital literacy. While being able to read print is still crucial in online spaces, it is no longer necessarily the most dominant literacy skill (Mills, 2010).

Online texts are non-linear and more open ended and unbounded by nature (Dobson and Willinsky, 2009), defying our common understanding of the reading process. Moreover, websites are often multi-layered, requiring deeper investigation (Jewitt, 2005). Hence, reading in this new literacy landscape is not simply a process of movement from the first word to the last in a stable and linear pattern (Pahl and Rowsell, 2006). McKenna et. al (1999) suggest that when children read a multimodal text they are engaged in a challenging textual landscape that is interactive, and contains integrated multimedia content and a limitless range of choices. Hence, the onus is on them to independently construct a pathway towards a goal.

New literacy studies research has called for reading in digital spaces to be developed in learning environments, as people of all ages are being challenged to adapt to new technologies (Dwyer, 2012; Jewitt, 2005; Mc Kenna et. al, 1999). Mills (2010) demands support for children so they can develop an understanding of how to choose which elements of the text they should engage with. Moreover, children need guidance on how to take cues from webpages on ways to navigate successfully (Walsh, 2006). Finally, Walsh (2008) and Pahl and Rowsell (2005) believe that to meaningfully engage with multimodal texts, children need to understand them as constructed artefacts. Hence, it is important that children are given the opportunities to engage with developing multimodal texts to nurture their understanding of the importance of each mode.

Making classroom literacy meaningful in a digital age

As the current Irish *Primary School Curriculum* (PSC) (Government of Ireland (GOI), 1999) claims that all learning should begin with the child; his/her interests, needs and experiences, it is unsurprising that in this digital age, there should be a clear call for technological integration in schools (Merchant, 2009; Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). However, research suggests that internationally and in Ireland there is an increasing gap between children's

literacy practices in and out of school (Larson and Marsh, 2006; Gee, 2004). Moreover, Dwyer (2012) highlights that children's literacy interests and digital literacy practices continue to be largely ignored or side lined in the classroom. As a result, an identified tension appears to have developed between the home and the school, where teachers often utilise traditional print texts and resources in which the children may have little interest. Moreover, worryingly, Burnett and Merchant (2012) claim that this failure to acknowledge effectively the different literacy environments of home and school may be causing frustration and feelings of failure among some children.

Much of this tension has resulted in a reality where educators are currently at a point where they are unsure how to cope effectively with developing new literacies (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). It appears that an adequate blend of print and digital literacy is essential although the common classroom reality is that traditional literacy pedagogical practices continue to dominate (National College of Ireland, 2009). Consequently, the question remains whether traditional literacy development should be improved or completely transformed by technology (Merchant, 2009), a debate which is represented in the discourse around the 'enrichment' and 'transformation' models.

The enrichment and transformation models dichotomy

The enrichment perspective on digital literacy proposes to support or replace traditional printed texts with electronic or digital equivalents, paying little attention to developing pedagogy or the evolving nature of literacy (Burnett et al., 2006; Reinking et. al, 2000). It views technological advances as simply increases in the number of ways of supporting traditional literacy. This model of treating technology as a tool or resource to support traditional print literacy objectives is proposed in the English language section of the current Irish Primary School Curriculum (GOI, 1999). Within this type of learning environment, the potential for technology use is understood in terms of traditional literacy and is simply integrated into conventional lessons (Reinking et. al, 2000). Teachers, as a result, tend to introduce new technology as a tool to reproduce traditional literacy lessons through, for example, using interactive whiteboards (IWBs) as a direct replacement for blackboards and laptops for textbooks.

However, Tan and Guo (2010) posit that the ICT explosion calls for new and more innovative understandings of literacy development beyond mere enrichment. Moreover, Reinking et. al (2000) highlight the dangers of trying to move technology seamlessly into the traditional literacy curriculum. They go so far as to propose that new technologies necessitate a reassessment of current understandings of literacy. In this model, new technologies and technological practices lead to reconceptualised understandings of literacy and ultimately lead to new definitions, objectives, classroom environments and pedagogies.

Teachers should be aware of the types of potential changes to the learning environment, which technology is capable of creating. While the enrichment model aims to manipulate technology to meet the needs of traditional teacher led print literacy lessons, the transformation model supports technological advancements in developing literacy lessons that radically engage learners in real online digital literacy practices, in line with their daily out

of school literacy practices. In a transformative model classroom, students are given the opportunity to develop as active and independent digital learners (Marsh, 2007) and more attention is paid to their digital expertise (Alvermann, 2008). In such a classroom environment, learning must be meaningful (Reinking et. al, 2000), the voice of the student is paramount (Perkins et al., 2011) and there should be a place for both teacher and student led lessons utilising technology (Leu, 2000a).

Barriers to effective digital literacy support

Digital literacy has become a preoccupation of many educational policy makers as they attempt to nurture a population capable of functioning effectively in the 21st century (Livingstone, 2004). In 2009, the International Reading Association (IRA) called for education systems where all children would be supported in their endeavours to become digitally literate (IRA, 2009). They demanded equity in the standard of teachers, access, assessment, internet safety, curriculum opportunities and critical literacy development. However, the reality appears to be quite different with research suggesting that this is far from being the case. Warschauer (2008) identifies this situation and suggests that the current international situation regarding digital literacy is dominated by inadequate policy development and lack of any substantial changes in literacy development practice.

Only a limited amount of research in Ireland has discussed the importance of digital literacy. In 2004, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) proposed a vision where all children would be ICT literate by the time they left school. Similarly, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2011) acknowledge that children in schools at all levels should be capable of reading, writing and communicating using both print and digital media. However, both the NCCA and the DES have failed to adequately address the issue of online reading. The reality in schools is that children are not being exposed to a sufficient amount of electronic reading. This could be gleaned from Shiel (2011), who reports that between 2004 and 2009, there was no increase in the level of IT usage by children in Irish schools.

Teachers with adequate levels of knowledge are vital in nurturing digital literacy in the classroom. However, it would appear that the lack of impact of digital literacy practice could be traced to the fact that teachers appear to suffer from a lack of awareness and confidence in the promotion of digital literacy (Larson and Marsh, 2006). As a result, teachers are finding it difficult to adapt and therefore continue to attempt to engage children, almost exclusively in many cases, in print literacy practices (Graham, 2008).

Continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers has a direct impact on the literacy learning of children (DES, 2011; Garbe, Holle and Weinhold, 2009). However internationally, explicit professional support for teachers with respect to literacy development generally remains limited (Leu, 2000b). Similarly, in Ireland, policy makers and researchers concur that CPD to support teachers has traditionally been and remains inadequate (The Teaching Council, 2011; Sugrue, 2002). Within this context, even less attention has been paid in Ireland to CPD specific to literacy development. Consequently, if teachers are not being supported to develop their understandings and pedagogies with respect to digital literacy,

it is likely that this will impinge negatively on the digital literacy learning experiences and practices of children in their classrooms. In this light, Concannon-Gibney and Murphy (2012) propose a radical overhaul of CPD with respect to literacy, suggesting a progressive model where needs-based individualised school support with respect to literacy development in the broadest sense (including digital literacy), would be provided by literacy experts. Similar positions also emerge from other Irish research in the digital literacy area (see for example Dwyer 2010 and 2012).

Method

The data in this paper draw on findings from a small scale qualitative interpretive research study undertaken using focus group discussions as a method of collecting data. The goal of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives, experiences and classroom practices of a group of Irish teachers in the current digital age and it was therefore decided that a qualitative approach would provide the deepest and richest data. Furthermore, focus groups were selected because they offer the researcher a chance to become familiar with the real experiences of the interviewees (Krueger, 1994).

The focus group convenience sample consisted of 17 primary classroom teachers from one geographical area (the Cork area in the south of Ireland). Barbour (2007) claims that an adequate focus group discussion can be undertaken with three to four participants. In total, four focus groups were undertaken. In terms of the social classification of the participants' schools, all four were of mixed social class. Reflecting the gender pattern of representation across the primary school sector, the majority of participants were female (14) varying in age (up to age 54) and classroom experience (up to 35 years). All of the teachers involved in the study had some familiarity with using technology in their classrooms.

Each focus group lasted approximately 40 minutes and was guided by a list of key questions. The process was modelled on Stewart et al.'s (2007) approach where there is a clear emphasis on creating a comfortable environment so participants don't feel threatened and are willing to engage with the discussion. As a result, some ground rules were initially established including an expectation that everyone would display openness and show each participant respect. The raw data from the recorded focus group interviews was transcribed, including probes, slang and pauses (Berg, 2009).

In the next stage of the process, a content analysis approach to examining the focus group transcripts was adopted (Berg, 2009). Cohen et al. (2011) recommend that data reduction and transformation should occur to ensure that relevant themes and patterns can be drawn out before analysis. As a result, the data was summarised after the transcription, acknowledging key quotations and terms. The next step in the process was coding, where content of the transcripts was examined to identify common trends within and between focus groups (Ryan, 2006). This flexible process of determining the themes to be included in the research was both inductive and deductive, including predetermined themes but also being flexible enough to integrate themes established by the participants (Barbour, 2007). Some of the key themes to emerge included literacy development in the 21st century, movement towards digital literacy support, making literacy meaningful in a digital age and

barriers to effective digital literacy instruction. Having extracted the themes, the analysis shifted from description to interpretation (Ryan, 2006).

Findings and discussion

Literacy teaching in the 21st century

In the new literacies model, the crucial role for technology and the internet in literacy development is acknowledged as literacy evolves to support new digital literacy practices. Nevertheless, despite an acknowledgment of the changes in the understandings of literacy, educators are currently at a point where they are unsure how to cope effectively (Dwyer, 2012; Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). Rather unsurprisingly, it was obvious from the focus groups that the vast majority of participating teachers in this study still shared the traditional understanding of literacy as synonymous with reading and writing printed words on paper and skills such as phonics and fluency (Focus group discussion (FG)2, participating teacher (P)5; FG3, P12; FG4, P14). As participant 11, a teacher with eight years' experience, noted: "To me really, literacy would be reading the old fashioned way". (FG3, page of the transcript (p.1). There did not appear to be any place for technology in the general understanding of literacy among the surveyed teachers. This is significant as there are very strong indications in current research that the continued overemphasis on this type of decontextualised literacy support may be leading to increased disinterest in school literacy activities among some children (Hamston, 2006).

The key role of technology in society has forced the hand of educators, and policy makers around the world are attempting to harness the potential of technology and the internet in improving literacy education (Warschauer and Matuchniak, 2010). As a result, there is constant pressure on teachers, demanding that computers and other technologies be integrated into the learning environment. However, despite this, the level of technological integration in Irish classrooms appears to remain limited, and participating teachers consistently commented on the lack of resources. Participant two, a teacher in a large urban primary school, stated: "I think that really we need the resources to incorporate that into schools. You know one computer in a room is not going to do it, not going to cut it." (FG1, p.7). This is considerably out of line with the advocated, one laptop with wireless access per child, proposed by Leu et al. (2008).

Notably, the introduction of the interactive whiteboard seems to be the only consistent technological advancement mentioned extensively in this study, which has caused the greatest recent change in the literacy learning environment (FG1, P1; FG 2, P8). Traditionally, textbooks would have been the foundation upon which literacy lessons in Ireland were built. However, technological advancements have now made the IWB an invaluable resource. Participant two went so far as to state that the IWB had become the primary resource for her when supporting literacy development "I suppose the interactive whiteboard would be the biggest part of my literacy teaching". (FG1, p.4).

Turel and Johnson (2012) and Shenton and Pagett (2007) claim that although the IWBs can be seen as a move towards technological integration, teachers often use them to support and enrich traditional teacher-led print literacy lessons. Similarly, it emerged during discussions

that the main use for the IWB during literacy lessons appeared to be as a technological replacement for the traditional whiteboard. Teachers, overall, appeared satisfied with the ease with which the IWB allowed them to use *Powerpoint* to teach lessons, examine textbooks online with children, and improve phonics (FG1, P3; FG3, P13; FG4, P15). This is in line with the previous findings of Mulcahy (2010) in respect of the traditional enrichment literacy learning environment of Irish classrooms.

Digital literacy practices have the potential to disrupt current literacy practices by revolutionising teaching and learning in a transformative model (Walsh, 2008: Somekh, 2007). They propose less of an emphasis on transmitting knowledge and more support for children actively engaging in learning in digital spaces, with the teacher scaffolding support (Graham, 2008). However, somewhat surprisingly, only one of the 17 teachers surveyed, demonstrated an awareness of the potential change in the learning environment where ICT integration and internet usage could be introduced to alter the learning context as advocated by current research (Merchant, 2009; Reinking et. al, 2000). Participant 16, who admitted to having a limited understanding of digital literacy, appeared genuinely excited by the possibilities of the internet and other technology. Alone among the 17 teachers, this participant proposed that control and responsibility could be shared with the children in an interactive classroom where the children are given greater technological access and independence: "When I want to find something out that I don't know I go and find it. I check out that it's ok. Maybe they should do more of that and they could be more independent."

The discussion to date has clearly highlighted that the traditional print dominated, skills based, whole class instruction approach to literacy development remains prevalent in Irish classrooms. Secondly, despite a push for ICT integration into literacy learning lessons, children are still not generally accessing technology and the internet in schools. Moreover, the idea of children actively and independently engaging with technology at this level seems, at present, to be an unrealistic prospect due to a lack of understanding and support structures and willingness and ability on behalf of a majority of teachers to introduce this type of learning environment.

Current digital literacy support in the literacy learning environment

Undeniably, traditional print literacy lessons are still key to literacy development programmes in schools. Nevertheless, to become literate in a digital age, engagement with technology in an appropriate manner is crucial in supporting digital literacy development (Larson and Marsh, 2006). However, digital literacy in Irish classrooms often remains synonymous with the technical skills needed to operate computers (NCCA, 2004). Unsurprisingly, a number of the participating teachers defined digital literacy as developing children's abilities to turn on and off computers and improving word processing skills (FG2, P7; FG4, P15).

Notably, an overwhelming majority of the surveyed teachers seemed to believe that digital literacy development equated to using technology as a tool for teachers to support the teaching of traditional print reading skills. The internet (or electronic texts) did not seem to have been introduced into the classroom as a vital resource in supporting children in developing their online skills. Rather, it appeared to be used as a teaching resource in a

teacher-led, typically instruction based classroom, allowing teachers to access 'more material' (FG2, P9, p.3) and make lessons 'much more eye catching' (FG3, P11, p.4). Certainly, these interpretations of digital literacy among the majority of surveyed teachers would appear to be in stark contrast to those acknowledged in current research (Leu et al., 2005).

Prensky (2001) outlines how he believes that children nowadays are comfortable with technology and the internet, whereas many teachers are struggling to adapt. In agreement, many of the teachers in this study suggested that the children were the digital age. As participant 14 noted: "But with the children the technology is theirs, they have ownership over it. So they're comfortable with it" (FG4, p.13). Hence, it appears that a significant reason why teachers may be failing to support a movement towards effective digital literacy support lies in their overestimation of the capabilities of children. Certainly, the majority of the participants claimed that the children were digitally competent and capable of reading and searching online. In spite of this finding and the claims made by Prensky (2001), children need explicit support in understanding digital spaces as a result of frequently being challenged by the vast amount of information on internet sites. Hence, modelling, guiding and facilitating children's practice of digital literacy remains a key role for all teachers (Mills, 2010; Marsh, 2007).

To summarise these key findings, it appears that the surveyed teachers' understandings of how they should be developing digital literacy are at present insufficient. Teachers in this study narrowly defined digital literacy merely as the introduction of ICT to support traditional literacy learning. Although current research highlights the importance of digital literacy development, current classroom provision seems inadequate in this respect. Teachers' overemphasis on the abilities and confidence of children in negotiating digital spaces may be contributing to this lack of digital literacy support in the classroom.

Making literacy meaningful in a digital age

Appreciating children's identities outside of school and supporting contextualised literacy development appears to create a richer learning environment and the ultimate goal of literacy should be to direct children so that they can lead meaningful lives both in and outside the school environment (Mills, 2010; Hall, 2008). Participating teachers agreed that literacy learning should begin with the child and accommodate their interests and abilities (FG1, P1; FG4, P16). Participant 11 claimed that: "Every lesson has to be meaningful, you know, or it won't sink in I think" (FG3, p.6). Surprisingly, however, the home/school literacy link was traditionally viewed as one-dimensional, from school to home (FG3, P7). Even participant 9, a teacher comfortable with using ICT, highlighted the issue when she noted: "But I think it's more what we use in school, they use at home. Rather than what they use at home being used in school" (FG2, p.5). Significantly, this lack of attention to the children's literacy practices outside of school may call into question the willingness or ability of many teachers to integrate the experiences and interests of children across all curricular areas.

Lambirth (2003) and Merchant (2005) claim that the more recent digital literacy interests of children have been somewhat ignored in classrooms, often as a result of the prevalence of negative attitudes towards children's digital literacy practices among the teaching community. Similarly, the devaluing of some children's home digital literacy practices

emerged as an important finding during this study (FG4, P16; FG2, P7). Participant 12 clearly highlighted this point when he remarked on the low or poor learning value of some of the digital literacy practices of the children in his class: "Nothing educational now. They'd be on Moshi Monsters and online games or one or two of them would be watching *YouTube* or watching cartoons" (FG3, p.6). It would appear that some of the children's online activities are not even recognised as forms of literacy despite research providing evidence to the contrary (Gee and Levine, 2009). As participant one noted: "And I suppose it's not… literacy... I mean *YouTube* has taken over for a lot of them" (FG1, p.6).

The key findings here would seem to indicate that although teachers acknowledge the fundamental role meaningful learning should occupy in literacy lessons, in practice it plays a limited role. While teachers are aware of the digital literacy practices of children at home, little effort has been made to integrate these practices into the literacy classroom. This may contribute to a growing gap between the home and school literacy practices of students.

Key barriers to creating effective digital literacy classrooms

There appears to be an increasing awareness among governments and international bodies of the role of digital literacy in actually supporting child literacy development. Current international educational research suggests that digital literacy development should be an essential component of any effective literacy support (Marsh, 2009; Coiro and Dobler, 2007) with the new online reading skills including the ability to critically evaluate, undertake searches, and navigate multimodal landscapes becoming essential (Dwyer, 2012; Walsh, 2007). Similarly, Irish educational policy expects teachers to play an active role in nurturing digital literacy, particularly evident with the publication of *ICT in the Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 2004) and the recent *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (DES, 2011).

However, many of the surveyed teachers showed signs of a lack of knowledge of what was expected of them regarding digital literacy, with prolonged periods of silence and declarations of uncertainty during focus group discussions when online reading strategies were addressed. It seemed obvious by omissions that many of the participating teachers were not supporting children in the development of digital literacy at all. Participant 11 was unsure where to begin to teach these skills as evidenced by her statement: "Would you have to start with the basics? I suppose you'd start with the search tools and work from there" (FG3, p.11). Likewise, participant six, a teacher in only her second year teaching, exhibited some uncertainty about her role as a teacher in respect of digital literacy when she addressed the issue: "So are we saying that we should explicitly teach this to the children? It seems to be very important…" (FG2, p.8). Significantly, when specifically asked about multimodal texts, although a number offered guesses (FG1, P3; FG3, P10), the majority of the teachers admitted to a lack of awareness (FG4, P17; FG2, P11). Moreover, participant 14, currently teaching first and second class in a rural school declared: "I've never heard that word before" (FG4, P14, p.15).

This policy practice gap would seem to suggest that it remains uncertain whether or not the government sees digital literacy development as a real priority in Irish classrooms, despite references to digital literacy in policy documents (DES, 2011). The findings emerging from

this study would lead one to believe that digital literacy support is currently in a very undeveloped state in Irish classrooms because of the disjunction between advocated policy on one hand and teacher understandings and supported practice on the other. It is evident that the importance of digital literacy needs to be made more explicit to all teachers at initial teacher education (ITE) and CPD levels as advocated by Sugrue (2002).

Guskey (2000) claims that teacher education and CPD opportunities are essential to ensure that the teaching profession remains dynamic and capable of evolving as circumstances change and complex issues arise. However, most of the surveyed teachers in this study felt that CPD for Irish teachers in the literacy area is currently both inadequate and infrequent and practically non-existent with respect to the digital literacy area. In many respects, teacher professional development in key curricular areas relies on teachers developing their own interests and skills incidentally and more formally through post-graduate study. As participant three noted: "I suppose it depends if a teacher is good at computers themselves or is interested in computers. Because I don't think we've ever had any professional development" (FG1, p.13). In Ireland, Concannon-Gibney and Murphy (2012) propose a progressive needs based model of CPD in literacy that supports teachers and schools in developing literacy pedagogy according to the challenges facing their specific situation. However, while CPD is prioritised in the Irish National Literacy Strategy (DES, 2011), it remains to be seen if adequate financial support will be provided to develop and implement an effective model for all teachers, which will impact on teachers' understandings and practices in literacy in the broadest possible sense.

The issue of teacher capabilities and confidence is a recurring topic across the digital literacy research literature (Dwyer, 2012; Marsh, 2009; Prensky, 2001; Leu, 2000a). It seems that increased levels of anxiety are being experienced by teachers as a result of the growing expectations on educators to integrate ICT seamlessly into classroom pedagogy, despite teachers' feelings of being unprepared for such practice. Notably, these concerns also emerged during the focus group discussions with the participating teachers in this study. Respondents commented on deficiencies in 'knowledge' (FG3, P10, p.13), 'expertise' (FG4, P16, p.14) and 'confidence' (FG4, P15, p.14) as significant obstacles to offering effective digital literacy support in Irish classrooms. Participant six captured these kinds of views explicitly in outlining: "I think my level of expertise is a barrier. Obviously, if I knew more, I could do more" (FG2, p.9). It would appear that a systemic professional environment would need to be created for teachers in line with the views of Merchant (2009), where creativity, innovation and reflection are promoted, and where teachers system wide are afforded the time to develop their understandings of and experimentation with digital literacy practices.

This discussion has highlighted some of the main barriers to the provision of effective digital literacy support in Irish classrooms. It would seem that the gap between government policy and classroom practice is clearly obstructing development. CPD for teachers in Ireland with respect to literacy, and especially pertaining to digital literacy, emerges as inadequate in spite of the reality that the understandings and competencies of the majority of teachers to adequately develop digital literacy urgently need to be addressed.

Looking forward

Literacy is continually evolving and extended research needs to continue to be undertaken to ensure learning environments in schools constantly embrace the ever changing literacy contexts and practices. The overall picture, which emerges from this small scale study, conducted in just one small geographical area, is one where considerable work needs to be done as a matter of urgency. Firstly, the onus is certainly on policy makers and teacher educators, in Ireland and internationally, to prioritise the building of teachers' understandings, beliefs and practices in the context of a broad and holistic understanding of literacy incorporating the everyday digital realities of 21st century school students. It is likely that this would be achieved through sustained and reformed programmes of initial teacher education and continuous professional development for all teachers, which emphasise and prioritise the reform of literacy pedagogy in all classrooms in line with contemporary digital developments. Secondly, there appears to be a crucial role for supporting teachers to engage in research where they are encouraged to experiment with technology across their pedagogy of literacy in a transformed child centred learning environment. Finally, in this light, further research which gives a voice to children and explores their digital literacy practices, including how they navigate and make sense of online spaces, needs to be conducted. How children feel about current literacy lessons in classrooms and whether or not this is affecting their engagement with literacy would also possibly merit investigation. It is only through such means that the literacy development experience of students in schools will be enhanced, which is especially vital in view of the primacy of language and literacy in enabling learning, establishing social identity and in later educational and vocational success.

Bibliography

Alvermann, D.E. (2008). Why Bother Theorizng Adolescents' Online Literacies for Classroom Practice and Research? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52(1), pp.8-19.

Barbour, R. (2007). *Doing Focus Groups*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Berg, B.L. (2009). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

Burnett, C., and Merchant, G. (2012). Learning, literacies and new technologies: the current context and future possibilities. In: J. Larson and J. Marsh (Eds), *The Handbook of Early Literacy*, London: Sage.

Burnett, C., Dickinson, P., Myers, J., and Merchant, G. (2006). Digital connections: transforming literacy in the primary school. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 36(1), pp.11-29.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2011). *Research Methods in Education*. New York: Routledge.

Coiro, J. (2009). Rethinking Online Reading Assessment, *Educational Leadership*, March, pp.59-63.

Coiro, J., and Dobler, E. (2007). Exploring the online reading comprehension strategies used by sixth-grade skilled readers to search for and locate information on the Internet. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 42(2), pp. 214-257.

Concannon-Gibney, T., and Murphy, B. (2012). School-based teacher professional development to transform reading comprehension: an Irish case study. *Professional Development in Education*, 38(1), pp.131-147.

Department Of Education And Skills. (2011). *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*. Dublin: Government Publications.

Dobson, T., and Willinsky, J. (2009). Digital Literacy. In: D. Olson and N. Torrance (Eds), *Cambridge Handbook of Literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dwyer, B. (2012). Meeting the Challenges of 21st Century Literacies: Equity and Excellence for all Students. In: A. Kelly, B. Dwyer, G. Mehigan and G. Watson, (Eds.) *Creating Multiple Pathways to Powerful Literacy in Challenging Times*. Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland.

Dwyer, B. (2010). *Scaffolding Internet Reading: A Study of a Disadvantaged School Community in Ireland*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nottingham: UK.

Garbe, C., Holle, K., and Weinhold, S. (2009). *Teaching Adolescent Struggling Readers. A Comparative Study of Good Practices in European Countries*. European Commission, ADORE project report. (Online accessed 21 January 2013). Available from: http://ec.europa.eu/education/transversal-programme/doc/studies/2006adore_en.pdf

Gee, J.P., and Levine, M.H. (2009). Welcome to Our Virtual Worlds. *Educational Leadership*, 66(6), pp.48-52. (Online accessed 17 January 2010). Available from: www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el200903_gee.pdf

Gee, J.P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. London: Routledge.

Government Of Ireland. (1999). *English: Language*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Government Of Ireland. (1999). *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Graham, L. (2008). Teachers are digikids too: the digital histories and digital lives of young teachers in English primary schools. *Literacy*, 42(1), pp.10-18.

Guskey, T.R. (2000). *Evaluating Professional Development*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Hall, K. (2008). Challenging traditional representations of texts and learning. *Literacy*, 42(3), pp.121-122.

Hamston, J. (2006). Pathways to multiliteracies: Student teachers' critical reflections on a multimodal text. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 29(1), pp.38-51.

Handsfield, L.J., Dean, T.R., and Cielocha, K.M. (2009). Becoming Critical Consumers and Producers of Text: Teaching Literacy with Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. *The Reading Teacher*, 63(1), pp. 40-50.

Hedberg, J.G., and Brudvik, O.C. (2008). Supporting Dialogic Literacy Through Mashing and Modding of Places and Spaces. *Theory Into Practice*, 47, pp.138-149.

International Reading Association. (2009). *New literacies and 21st century technologies: A position statement*. Newark, DE: IRA. (Online accessed 31 May 2014). Available from: www.reading.org/Libraries/position-statements-and-resolutions/ps1067_NewLiteracies21stCentury.pdf

Jewitt, C. (2005). Multimodality, "Reading", and "Writing" for the 21st Century. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 26(3), pp.315-331.

Kamil, M.L., Intrator, S.M., and Kim, H.S. (2000). The Effects of Other Technologies on Literacy and Literacy Learning. In: M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson and R. Barr (Eds), *Handbook of Reading Research Volume 3*, New Jersey: Laurence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

Kennedy, E., Dunphy, E., Dwyer, B., Hayes, G., Mc Phillips, T., Marsh, J., O'Connor, M., and Shiel, G. (2012). *Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3-8 years)*. NCCA, Research Report No. 15 (Online accessed 14 January 2014). Available from: www.ncca.ie/en/Publications/Reports/Literacy_in_Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education_3-8_years.pdf

Kinzer, C.K. (2005). The Intersection of Schools, Communities, and Technology: Recognizing Children's Use of New Literacies. In: R.A. Karchmer, M.H. Mallette, J. Kara-Soteriou and D.J. Leu, *Innovative Approaches to Literacy Education: Using the Internet to Support New Literacies*, USA: International Reading Association, Inc.

Krueger, R.A. (1994). *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research*. London: Sage Publications.

Lambirth, A. (2003). "They get enough of that at home": understanding aversion to popular culture in schools. *Reading*, 37(1), pp. 9-13.

Lankshear, C., and Knobel, M. (2006). *New Literacies: Everyday Practices & Classroom Learning second edition*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Larson, J., and Marsh, J. (2006). *Making Literacy Real: theories and practices for learning and teaching*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Leu, D.J., Coiro, J., Castek, J., Hartman, D.K., Henry, L.A., Reinking, D. (2008). Research on instruction and assessment of the new literacies of online reading comprehension. In C.C. Block, S. Parris, and P. Afflerbach (Eds). *Comprehension instruction: Research based best practices.* New York: Guilford Press.

Leu, D.J. Jr., Mallette, M.H., Karchmer, R.A., and Kara-Soteriou, J. (2005). Contextualizing the New Literacies of Information and Communication Technologies in Theory, Research and Practice. In: R.A. Karchmer, M.H. Mallette, J. Kara-Soteriou and D.J. Leu, *Innovative Approaches to Literacy Education: Using the Internet to Support New Literacies*, USA: International Reading Association, Inc.

Leu, D.J. Jr. (2000a). Literacy and Technology: Deictic Consequences for Literacy Education in an Information Age. In: M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson and R. Barr (Eds), *Handbook of Reading Research Volume 3*, New Jersey: Laurence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

Leu, D.J. Jr. (2000b). Our children's future: Changing the focus of literacy and literacy instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 53(5), pp.424-429.

Livingstone, S. (2004). Media literacy and the challenge of new information and communication technologies. *The Communication Review*, 7, pp.3-14.

Marsh, J. (2011). Young Children's Literacy Practices in a Virtual World: Establishing an Online Interaction Order. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 46(2), pp.101-118.

Marsh, J. (2009). Literacy Teaching and Learning in the Digital Era. In: B. Culligan (Ed), *The Changing Landscapes of Literacy – Building Best Practice*. Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland.

Marsh, J. (2007). Digital Childhoods, Digital Classrooms: The Teaching and Learning of Literacy in a New Media Age. In: B. Dwyer and G. Shiel, (Eds.) *Literacy at the Crossroads: Moving forward, Looking back*. Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland.

Mc Gowan, M. (2005). My Internet Projects and Other Online Resources for the Literacy Classroom. In: R.A. Karchmer, M.H. Mallette, J. Kara-Soteriou and D.J. Leu, *Innovative Approaches to Literacy Education: Using the Internet to Support New Literacies*. USA: International Reading Association, Inc.

Mc Kenna, M.C., Reinking, D., Labbo, L.D., and Kieffer, R.D. (1999). The Electronic Transformation of Literacy and its Implications for the Struggling Reader. *Reading and Writing Quarterly,* 15, pp.111-126.

Merchant, G. (2009). Literacy in virtual worlds. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 32(1), pp.38-56.

Merchant, G. (2007). Writing the future in the digital age. *Literacy*, 41(3), pp.118-128.

Merchant, G. (2005). Digikids: cool dudes and the new writing. *E-learning*, 2(1), pp. 50-60.

Millard, E., and Marsh, J. (2001). Sending Minnie the Minx Home: comics and reading choices. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 31(1), pp.25-38.

Mills, K.A. (2010). Shrek Meets Vygotsky: Rethinking Adolescents' Multimodal Literacy Practices in Schools. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 54(1), pp.35-45.

Moran, J., Ferdig., R.E., Pearson, P.D., Wardrop, J., and Blomeyer, R.L. Jr. (2008). Technology and Reading Performance in the Middle-School Grades: A Meta-Analysis with Recommendations for Policy and Practice. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 40(6), pp.6-35.

Mulcahy, C.M. (2010). A Transformative Literacy for the 21st Century. In: T. Concannon-Gibney, A. Kelly and K. Willoughby (Eds), *Literacy in the 21st Century: Perspectives, Challenges and Transformations.* Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland.

Murphy, B. (2009). Curriculum Contestation – A Retrospective and Prospective Look at the Case of Reading Development in Ireland. In: B. Culligan (Ed), *The Changing Landscapes of Literacy – Building Best Practice.* Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland.

National College Of Ireland. (2009). *Digital Literacy: New Approaches to Participation and Inquiry Learning to Foster Literacy Skills among Primary School Children.* (Online accessed 14 January 2010). Available from: www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/9765/Digital_Literacy_in_Primary_Schools_-_Research_Report.pdf?sequence=4

National Council For Curriculum And Assessment. (2004). *Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the Primary School Curriculum.* (Online accessed 4 February 2012). Available from: www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/ecpe/ictenglish.pdf

O' Leary, M. (2006). Towards a Balanced System for Irish Primary and Secondary Schools. *Oideas*, 52, pp.7-24.

Pahl, K., and Rowsell, J. (2005). *Literacy and Education: Understanding the New Literacy Studies in the Classroom*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Perkins, R., Moran, G., Shiel, G., and Cosgrove, J. (2011). *Reading Literacy in PISA 2009: A Guide for Teachers.* (Online accessed 14 December 2011). Available from: www.erc.ie/documents/po9teachersguide.pdf

Prensky, M. (2001). *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants.* (Online accessed 14 December 2011). Available from: www.markprensky.com/writing/prensky%20%20digital%20natives,%20digital%20immigrants%20-%20part1.pdf

Reinking, D., Labbo, L.D., and Mc Kenna, M.C. (2000). From Assimilation to Accommodation: A Developmental Framework for Integrating Digital Technologies into Literacy Research and Instruction. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 23(2), pp. 110-112.

Rowsell, J., and Burke, A. (2009). Reading by Design: Two Case Studies of Digital Reading Practices. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 53(2), pp.106-118.

Ryan, A.B. (2006). Methodology: Analysing Qualitative Data and Writing up your Findings. In: M. Antonesa, H. Fallon, A.B. Ryan, A. Ryan, T. Walsh, and L. Borys, *Researching and Writing your Thesis: a guide for postgraduate students*. Maynooth: MACE.

Sangiuliano, G. (2005). Books on Tape for Kids: A Language Arts-Based Service-Learning Project. In: R.A. Karchmer, M.H. Mallette, J. Kara-Soteriou and D.J. Leu, *Innovative Approaches to Literacy Education: Using the Internet to Support New Literacies*. USA: International Reading Association, Inc.

Shenton, A., and Pagett, L. (2007). From 'bored' to screen: the use of the interactive whiteboard for literacy in six primary classrooms in England. *Literacy* 41(3), pp.129-135.

Shiel, G. (2011). Recent National (NA) and International (PISA) Assessments in Ireland: Key Findings and Implications. Seminar at Cork Education Centre, January 24th 2011. (Online accessed 10 December 2011). Available from: www.reading.ie/sites/default/files/documents/Seminars/Shiels_Seminar_Cork2011.pdf

Somekh, B. (2007). *Pedagogy and Learning with ICT: Researching the art of innovation*. New York: Routledge.

Spalter, A.M., and Van Dam, A. (2008). Digital Visual Literacy. *Theory Into Practice*, 47, pp.93-108.

Stewart, D.W., Shamdasani, P.M., and Rook, D.W. (2007). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*, second edition. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Street, B.V., and Efstein, A. (2007). *Literacy: an advanced resource book*. New York: Routledge.

Sugrue, C. (2002). Irish Teachers' Experiences of Professional Learning: implications for policy and practice. *Journal of In-Service Education*, 28(2), pp.311-338.

Tan, L., and Guo, L. (2010). From Print to Critical Multimedia Literacy: One Teacher's Foray Into New Literacies Practices. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53(4), pp.315-324.

The Teaching Council. (2011). *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education*. (Online accessed 15 December 2011). Available from: www.teachingcouncil.ie/_fileupload/Teacher%20Education/FINAL%20TC_Policy_Paper_SP.pdf

Turel, Y.K., and Johnson, T.E. (2012). Teachers' Belief and Use of Interactive Whiteboards for Teaching and Learning. *Educational Technology & Society*, 15(1), pp.381-194.

Walsh, M. (2006). The 'textual shift': Examining the reading process with print, visual and multimodal texts. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 29(1), pp.24-37.

Walsh, M. (2008). Worlds have collided and modes have merged: classroom evidence of changed literacy practices. *Literacy*, 42(2), pp.101-108.

Walsh, C. (2007). Creativity as capital in the literacy classroom: youth as multimodal designers. *Literacy*, 41(2), pp.79-85.

Warschauer, M. (2008). Laptops and Literacy: A Multi-Site Case Study. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 3, pp.52-67.

Warschauer, M., and Matuchniak, T. (2010). New technology and digital worlds: Analyzing evidence of equity and access, use, and outcomes. *Review of Research in Education*, 34(1), pp.179-225.

An exploration of formative assessment practices on children's academic efficacy

CAROL CONSTANT AND TRACEY CONNOLLY

Abstract

As teachers we strive to enable our students to reach to the best of their abilities. Through formative assessment we seek to establish our students' prior knowledge, plan for where they are going next and evaluate what needs to be done to get them there (Black and William 2009). Formative assessment is an interactive process students actively engage in the construct of their own knowledge and skills (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Wood 2011). Evidence has shown that formative assessment can produce an increase in student achievement (Black and William 1998b). This paper shows how formative assessment strategies were introduced into a mainstream primary school classroom and its effects on students' academic efficacy was investigated. A key premise of the research is that, for students to be able to develop their academic efficacy, they must develop their capacity to monitor the quality of their work. This research argues that these skills can be developed by providing formative assessment opportunities to students. The research highlights the opportunities and challenges arising from the investigation and concludes by proposing possible ways of implementing formative assessment practices for the improvement of teaching and learning.

Keywords: **assessment for learning, student efficacy, eagerness to learn, national policy.**

Introduction

Assessment is considered vital to the education process. Taken together, the Education Act (1998), the Primary School Curriculum (1999) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum* (2007), along with the development of the *National Strategy for the Improvement of Literacy and Numeracy among Young People* (2011) provide a key context for the form and content of assessment procedures within the Irish education system. The Education Act (1998) places a statutory requirement on schools to assess students and report the results of assessment to parents. The revised Primary School Curriculum (1999) provides the educational rationale for assessment in the teaching and learning process and contains a statement on assessment for each individual subject. These assessment statements outline the formative, summative and evaluative functions of assessment. The revised Primary School Curriculum (1999) further emphasises the role of formative classroom-based assessment and its use in the progression of students' learning. The successive policies delineate both the development of thinking on assessment in Ireland and the principle concerns that assessment should address.

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

As teachers we seek to establish our students' prior knowledge, plan for where they are going next and evaluate what needs to be done to get them there (Black and Wiliam, 2009:7). According to Thompson (2007), these three processes provide the theoretical foundation for formative assessment. Assessment is conceptualised as an interactive process whereby students actively engage in the construction of their own knowledge and skills (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Wood, 2011). Assessment is driven by what teachers and students do within the classroom. Evidence has shown that formative assessment is an essential component of classroom practice and available research indicates that formative assessment can produce a significant increase in student achievement (Black and William, 1998b). Assessment for Learning (AfL) achieves this by blending pedagogical and cognitive practices with social interaction and by placing the learner at the centre of the assessment process.

The *Primary School Curriculum* states that assessment is the means by which the teacher forms a picture of the short-term and long-term need of a student and plans future learning accordingly (DES, 1999:17). Assessment is concerned with gathering information and it refers to all activities undertaken by the teacher and the students which provide evidence that can be used to modify and improve teaching and learning activities. Assessment becomes formative assessment when this information is used to amend teaching to better meet the needs of the students (Black and Wiliam 1998b, p.2). Formative assessment involves activities such as monitoring students' progress, providing feedback, using prior knowledge, the integration of learning goals and involving students in peer and self-assessment (Shepard, 2000; Stiggins and Popham, 2008). The distinction between Assessment of Learning (AoL) and Assessment for Learning (AfL) is central to assessment practices.

According to Stiggins and Popham (2008), formative assessment is especially likely to influence students' academic efficacy and eagerness to learn. They assert that if AfL is operating successfully in a classroom, students' perception of their individual academic ability should either remain high or improve (Stiggins and Popham, 2008, p.1). This is because students will be continuously involved in successful learning experiences. The result of this success will encourage students to engage in learning and simultaneously affect their eagerness to learn. While there are undoubtedly many other outcomes connected to the effective implementation of formative assessment practices, this small scale study focuses its investigation on monitoring and analysing the impact of formative assessment practices on students' academic efficacy and their ability to learn.

Traditionally, it has been the teacher who was considered responsible for these components of a student's education but it is our belief that this responsibility should be shared with the learner (Black and Wiliam, 1998b; Shepard, 2000; Pollard, 1996; Popham, 2008). Formative assessment refers to frequent, interactive assessments of student progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching (Black and Wiliam, 2009). The positive impact of such assessment practices have been widely acknowledged (Black and Wiliam, 1998b; Elder and Paul, 2008; Torrence and Pryor, 2001). Furthermore, international research indicates that such an approach to assessment develops confident, motivated students and promotes the goals of lifelong learning.

Research context

This paper relates formative assessment practices to educational policy and pedagogical initiatives, while at the same time identifying potential ways of enhancing teaching methodologies to assist the effective implementation of formative assessment. One of the primary purposes of this research is to produce practical knowledge and information in relation to the process of formative assessment. It sets out to develop a framework for formative assessment that is transferable to varying class levels to contribute to the improvement of whole school assessment practice and policy. The classroom research was carried out with a third class in an Irish primary school by the class teacher. The main focus of the research was to investigate each student's academic efficacy and then monitor and evaluate changes following eight weeks of explicit formative assessment participation. Hence, the research investigates if the implementation of formative assessment strategies has an impact on students' academic efficacy. In addition to this, the research explores if participation with formative assessment procedures has any other effects for the individual students or the class group and if there is an impact on pedagogical practices and teaching methodologies used when the systematic use of formative assessment is used in daily classroom instruction.

Formative assessment can involve reporting students' final performance and grade but more importantly documenting what processes need to be undertaken in order to raise achievement in the future (Harlen, 2005, p.217). The past decades have seen a surge in research within the area of formative assessment. In terms of literature, Black and Wiliam (1998b) frequently cited evidence that formative assessment has a positive impact on student achievement. Black and Wiliam (1998b) drew this conclusion from reviewing in excess of 250 articles related to formative assessment. Their review cited evidence from several leading educational researchers from Australia, Switzerland, Hong Kong and the USA. In their writings they stated that the research they reviewed "shows conclusively that formative assessment does improve learning" and related increases in student achievement were "amongst the largest ever reported" (Black and Wiliam 1998a, p.61). This substantiates the view that formative assessment should be embedded in the ongoing instructional activities of the classroom.

The theory of formative assessment is relevant to the broad spectrum of learning outcomes and subject areas represented in the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). Formative assessment is an ongoing process. It involves responding to the student's learning in order to enable progression. Teachers must engage students in their own learning by providing rich feedback, using effective questioning and involving students in peer and self-assessment (Black and Wiliam 2009). The goal of formative assessment is to enable learners to further their own learning for, as Bruner (1960:17) stated in his early writing "the first object of any act of learning… is that it should serve us in the future. Learning should not only take us somewhere, it should allow us to go further more easily".

Black and Wiliam (1998a, p.10) defined formative assessment as "all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged". Later Popham (2006) suggested that assessment can be considered formative insofar as the information collected from the assessment is used within the assessment period, in order to

improve instruction to meet the needs of the students. Furthermore, in 2008 Popham stated that, formative assessment is a planned process during which the teacher or the student use assessment based evidence to modify the learning and instruction in progress. These explanations of assessment all differ significantly from those traditionally found in educational research. Formative assessment places the focus of the learning on the strategies students are using and not just on the outcomes they reach (Shepard, 2000a).

Formative assessment rejects the transmission model of teaching and seeks to actively engage students in the learning process. Research has found that the learning that takes place in school should be practical and related to the world that exists outside school (DES 1999). This not only makes learning more interesting and motivating for the students, it also enables students to develop the ability to use knowledge in a real context. This is an essential feature of formative assessment as throughout the process students will be required to transfer knowledge and skills within differing contexts. They will also be enabled to understand that teacher instruction and formative assessment are indivisible (Black and Wiliam, 1998a).

In addition to the development of cognitive skills, formative assessment practices also foster and encourage the development of learning dispositions such as students' eagerness to learn and ability to face challenges (Shepard 2000; Stiggins and Popham 2008). Available research suggests that formative assessment produces increases in students' achievement (Black and Wiliam 1998a). However, the process of how formative assessment is conceptualised and implemented still varies depending on context. Nonetheless, international researchers in the area of formative assessment recognise some key features of the process as being the following:

- learning goals should be clearly identified and articulated to the students,
- students should be provided with feedback that is linked to success criteria,
- both peer and self-evaluation are important for the development of metacognitive skills, and
- a climate of collaborative learning must be established between teacher and students. (Black and Wiliam, 2009:8)

These elements are vital to effective implementation of formative assessment. However, any attempt to change the form and purpose of classroom assessment must acknowledge prevailing beliefs, as conflict between instruction and assessment can arise as a result of differing views between old and new visions of teaching and learning (Shepard, 2000a).

Research aims and methodology

The research aims of this action research project were to investigate and develop formative assessment strategies in the primary school classroom from a practical perspective. It considered how formative assessment strategies can be incorporated into pedagogical practice to bring about changes in classroom assessment procedures. It sought to analyse the impact of explicit formative assessment instruction on students' academic efficacy and their eagerness to learn. The study aimed to answer if the implementations of formative assessment strategies have an impact on students' academic efficacy.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggest it is impossible to improve teaching without first developing an awareness of the situation in which it is carried out. This statement supported the ethnographic nature of the study. According to LeCompte and Preissle (1993), ethnographic research is a process which involves various methods of inquiry, an outcome and a subsequent record of the inquiry. The central aim of this research was to provide rich, holistic insights into students' views and actions, taking into consideration the social setting within which they occur.

The research was divided into three phases of implementation. Phase one was devoted to pre-intervention investigation and research. The teacher, as researcher, reflected on how assessment activities were currently managed. Students participated in a pre-intervention inventory and questionnaire to ascertain perceptions of academic efficacy and eagerness to learn. This was conducted before participants were exposed to explicit formative assessment instruction for the purposes of comparison at the later stage.

Phase two was concerned with the implementation of formative assessment strategies. Having previously identified aspects of formative assessment for improvement, strategies were put into operation to change the practices of teaching and learning.

Finally, phase three was focused on gathering and analysing post-intervention data to evaluate any changes and developments that occurred as a result of the intervention. This was undertaken from both the students' and the teacher's perspective.

The study was implemented over an eight-week period. It was recognised that was quite a limited period of time and, therefore, specific formative assessment strategies were prioritised. The strategies prioritised were learning goals, KWL (Know, Want to Learn, Learned) charts, rubrics, work samples with comments and individual and peer task review sheets. These were incorporated into the repertoire of the students' activities. Effective questioning and feedback were used by the teacher to supplement the outcomes of these strategies for the students.

Data collection

Stringer (2007) encourages the inclusion of students in action research interventions as it allows them the opportunity to construct their own knowledge. Qualitative research studies have verified that students are able to provide important insights into their own lives and education. In the context of this action research study, data collection methods concerned with listening to the voices of students have been incorporated.

Observation was a fundamental method in this qualitative inquiry to gain an accurate picture of the behaviours that are occurring in the classroom. It involved systematic noting and recording of events and behaviours within the social context of the study.

The use of the Student Affect Inventory (Popham and Stiggins, 2008) and a questionnaire at the beginning of the action research project were useful as they enabled the researchers to collect a range of information with relative ease. It was also a simple means of gathering information in relation to students' attitudes before the intervention took place (Koshy, 2005). Once completed, the questionnaires were used as a baseline for evaluating children's

attitudes and opinions and they were also used as a means of establishing a line of questioning for further data collection (Koshy, 2005).

A primary benefit of questionnaires is that they allow the collection of independent, impartial, open-minded data. They also enable comparison of responses between participants. This process was embarked on both pre and post the intervention period. However, it was necessary to take into consideration some potential challenges when administering questionnaires to students. As Scott (2000) highlights, literacy and numeracy difficulties may exist amongst some of the research sample, which could impact upon data collected. In addition, it is necessary to take cognisance of students' natural desire to give the correct answer.

As a means of establishing the quality, appropriateness and functionality of the questionnaire designed for students, a pilot questionnaire was administered to an alternative group of third class students. The purpose of this activity was to check the students' understanding of questions, to highlight areas of confusion and identify any administration errors.

Prior to the commencement of the study, informed consent was granted by the board of management of the school and the parents/guardians of the selected research sample. Parents/guardians of the participating children received a letter of consent outlining a detailed description of the initiative being undertaken and all participants were given the option to opt out of the study.

Research findings – pre-intervention

Analysis in action research is not about certainties but possibilities. It is not about why things have to be the way they are but rather what can be done to change a situation (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009). The aim of the intervention was to combine international research (Bennett 2010; Black and Wiliam, 1998a; 1998b; Shepard, 2000 and Stiggins and Popham, 2008) with national policy (DES, 2011; DES, 2000; NCCA, 2007) and curriculum (DES, 1999) to form a practical and applied perspective.

Formative assessment is a complex process and demands more than the elicitation of evidence from data gathered (Bennett, 2011). It involves analysing this evidence and making inferences based on conclusions. Like leading research in the area (Torrence and Pryor, 2001), this analysis is used to relate formative assessment practises to further improve teaching and learning.

The notions of self-perception, academic efficacy and eagerness to learn are problematic in relation to analysis and conclusions. They are dependent upon the beliefs and values reinforcing the individual perspective. Despite this, we believe that the research established credibility through active engagement between teacher and students, a multifaceted approach to data collection and a triangulation of results. Similarly, our conception of the validity of formative assessment measures rests within the triangulated view of the learning constructs which were being measured, the activities utilised to elicit students' responses and the use of an interpretive framework to understand and analyse these (Herman et al., 2010).

The overall aim of the research was to critically investigate the effects of explicit formative assessment strategies on students' academic efficacy and eagerness to learn. This could only be achieved by first establishing the students' perspectives of themselves as learners, what they thought learning is and what understanding they had of the concept of assessment. In order to statistically examine the impact of formative assessment strategies on students' academic efficacy and eagerness to learn, the Student Affect Inventory as created by Stiggins and Popham (2008) in affiliation with the Council of Chief State School Officers was administered to all participants at the commencement and the conclusion of the study. This was done in conjunction with an open ended questionnaire to elicit more in-depth responses from the students. These instruments gathered students' responses and opinions within four distinct aspects of the learning process:

- clear learning targets,
- receiving progress monitoring information,
- academic efficacy, and
- eagerness to learn

(Stiggins and Popham, 2008, p.4).

For our study, this inventory was administered to all participants at the commencement and the conclusion of the study.

Clear learning strategies

As part of the Student Affect Inventory, students were asked to respond to two statements in relation to their perceived clarity of learning goals. The first positively phrased statement was, "I usually understand what I am supposed to be learning". The second statement was contrastingly written and asserted, "Very often, I'm not certain about what I am supposed to be learning". These statements derive from the learning targets approach to formative assessment and are centred on the belief that learning goals focus the students' thinking, and allow for increased academic success and motivation to learn (Herman et al., 2010; Torrence and Pryor, 2001). Within this approach the students were made explicitly aware of the expected outcomes of the learning activity and the steps required to achieving task completion and success. Eighty six per cent of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they understood what they are supposed to be learning, whereas a minority (3%) disagreed.

Formative assessment advocates sharing learning targets with the students (Wiliam et al., 2004). While the Student Affect Inventory revealed an awareness of the purpose of a learning activity, the pre-intervention questionnaire results suggested the students did not feel this was consistently the case. When asked, "Do you always know what you are supposed to be learning during a lesson?", 19 of the 28 participants replied positively, with nine out of 28 students responding negatively. Of the 19 positive responses, 10 students made specific reference to the topic of the lesson. They interpreted this as information relative to potential learning goals and outcomes. These results indicate that there was a lack of depth in the learning goals provided to the students. They may have had an awareness of what they were supposed to be learning, but the results imply they did not have an understanding of learning content or goals.

Progress monitoring information

As asserted by Schunk (2004), the ability to self monitor work is a skill necessary for effective formative assessment. This process focuses the students' attention on what they are doing and causes them to reflect on their thinking as it occurs. However, self monitoring cannot occur without access to target goals and outcomes. This inter-dependence is reflected in the findings of the Student Affect Inventory and the student questionnaire. Once again, a correlation of results can be found between the positively and negatively framed questions. The students were again required to respond to two parallel statements. They were statement three and statement eight of the administered inventory, "Typically, I don't know if I am making progress as fast as I should" and "I get plenty of information to keep track of my own learning growth".

Statement eight, elicited relatively similar results to those found in relation to learning targets. An overall majority (52%) felt they were receiving sufficient guidance to monitor progress. However, those who had previously strongly disagreed with statement one remarked they had minimum awareness of what they were learning. This highlights the mutually supportive role of learning goals and progress monitoring information to enable the students to self monitor and assess.

The questionnaire further revealed that the students accepted insubstantial information as a means of monitoring their progress, citing remarks such as 'good, 'go maith' and 'keep it up' as sufficient for tracking their progress. When asked, "How do you know if your work is 'good?'" one child remarked that, "I know my work is good when teacher puts a star, or a tick, or writes, good work or excellent on my page". This non-descriptive feedback inhibits the students' ability to self-monitor progress. These findings identify the need for the implementation of formative assessment strategies specifically to guide student awareness of their progress and development. This will be done through the utilisation of KWL charts, traffic lights, rubrics and formative feedback as advocated by experts in the area of formative assessment.

Academic efficacy

Henk and Melnick (1995, p.471) see self efficacy as a "person's judgements of her or his own ability to perform an activity, and the effect this perception has on the ongoing and future conduct of the activity". These judgements can have an impact on the performance and achievement levels of individuals by influencing variables such as task involvement and avoidance, as well as effort applied and expectations of outcomes. The results of this category were surprising. In reply to statement two, "If I'm asked to learn new things, even if they are difficult, I know I can learn", eight out of 28 students asserted a lack of belief in their ability to learn new things. A comparable 10 out of 28 students responded positively to statement seven, "Even if I get lots of help and plenty of time, it is hard for me to learn new things". This level of response made academic efficacy the lowest scoring category of the Student Affect Inventory.

An individual's self-perceived ability in a particular area is a key feature of self efficacy. It can impact on a student's development socially and academically. These self perceptions

also impact on a student's motivation to learn and can promote or inhibit their want and ability to do so (Henk and Melnick, 1995).

Eagerness to learn

According to Black and Wiliam (1998a), a student's eagerness to learn can have a significant impact on their academic effectiveness and success. There is significant evidence that, with the implementation of suitable formative assessment, activities can positively impact on both student motivation and achievement (Stiggins and Popham, 2008). Statement four, "I'm excited to learn new things in school" prompted a majority of positive responses. In contrast, statement six, "Lots of the time I don't look forward to learning new things in school" elicited a majority of negative responses. The percentage of students who strongly disagreed with the statement may be indicative of students who are experiencing learning difficulties and have developed a negative attitude as a defence against failure. Low academic efficacy could also potentially impact upon their eagerness to learn.

When asked, "Do you like learning new things? Why/Why Not?" students' comments consisted of, "I love learning new things because that's how you get smarter," "I really enjoy learning new things because it is exciting and interesting," and "I think it is good to learn new things in school because that way school is never boring. I don't like it when we just revise old things".

At the opposite end of the spectrum, negative responses to the same question included; "I don't like learning new things because it is hard for me," "I don't like learning new things because I might get in trouble if I get it wrong," and "I don't like when we start new things in maths, it is really confusing and I forget what to do in my copy". The range of replies is indicative of the range of attitudes and abilities within the research group. For the purpose of this investigation, the focus will be on tracking those with low eagerness to learn to monitor and observe any developments throughout the research period.

One stark realisation on evaluation of pre-intervention data was that students were generally unclear of the purposes of assessment. The general consensus was that assessment was 'something teachers do'. This is in conflict with the NCCA's document, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum*, which identifies assessment as, "the child's perspective on the world and on his/her experience of learning" (2007, p.77). When questioned on, "What is the purpose of assessment?" 81% of students commented that assessment was solely for the use of the teacher. One reply stated that "teacher gives us tests sometimes so she knows what to teach us again". Another reply echoed this by saying, "We get tests so teacher can find out what we are good and bad at".

Another view of assessment, as elicited by the questionnaire, was that assessment exclusively involved tests. When asked what activities are done in school to check how much you are learning, a startling 86% of students identified tests as the only from of assessment used by teachers, while a mere 22% mentioned questioning or class activities as means of assessment. Testing was also revealed to be a stressful activity for students with 82% of participants questioned providing negative remarks towards assessment. One student stated that, "I hate tests cause I get confused and nervous and then get things wrong". This remark is reflective of the attitude of the majority involved in the intervention.

Research findings – post-intervention

Learning targets

The provision of learning targets to the students had an overall positive effect on their perceptions and understanding of what they are learning. This can be seen in the responses given in the pre and post student affect inventory. Clarifying learning targets was also found to have a positive impact on students' self-assessment as one student mentioned in the questionnaire that, "I like the targets because I know when I'll have everything done". Another student observed that "The targets help me in school by making me able to count what I can do and what I got to do".

Post intervention questionnaire findings revealed a substantial 24 out of 28 students claiming to have knowledge of what they are learning. When responding again to the question, "Do you know what you are supposed to be learning during a lesson?" students made remarks such as; "Yeah, teacher gives us our targets at the start so I know what we are going to be doing," and "Yes I know what I am supposed to be learning because before we start learning something new teacher gives us bullet points about it".

We found the provision of evaluation criteria by means of learning targets and rubrics enabled the students to better understand expectations and desired outcomes. This finding is echoed in the responses of the students. One student stated that, "I like now that teacher tells us what we will have to learn for each thing we do". Another student reported that, "when I know what I should do it makes it easier to get everything done". Another reply showed awareness of the steps involved in reaching a target, "it's good to know what to do next so you never have to stop". These statements indicate that the students were beginning to understand that there are goals they have to reach and a process involved in doing so. These findings provide support for Stiggins (2001) who held the belief that the students should become the main users of assessment information.

Of the strategies employed, students' comments and feedback in relation to the use of rubrics were continuously the most positive. Students liked the fact that the rubric provided them with information in relation to what was expected of them. It also allowed them to monitor their progress and development. One student stated that "the squares said about full stops... and I always forget them… this reminded me that I should try not to from now on". This feedback pointed to the increasing autonomy of learners through formative assessment, "It's better 'cause now teacher won't have to tell me all the time… I don't like that cause I should know already".

A few students were observed to be transferring the use of particular strategies to alternative purposes. They realised that their interpretation of 'good' writing for English activities was directly applicable to written activities within history, geography and other curricular areas. This finding demonstrates the cyclical nature of formative assessment as described by Black and Wiliam (1998b). One student spontaneously began to apply the use of rubrics to homework. When the teacher mentioned this to the class, they reacted very positively to the idea and praised the individual. The teacher then prompted a class discussion as to how this idea could be used to help the whole class. The solution devised by the students was that they should get a small version to keep in their homework journal. This suggestion

was acted upon and resulted in a noticeable improvement in the quality of the homework completed.

Progress monitoring information

When comparing the results of data gathered in relation to progress monitoring information, a shift can be seen in student replies. When asked, "How do you know if you are making enough progress in school?" 25 out of 28 students made reference to specific formative assessment strategies. In their responses the students also revealed an understanding of the purpose of the strategies. Some of their responses included, "I know I have learned enough if I have lots of information in the 'L' on my KWL chart", "I know because lots of times I can do everything on my rubric," and "I know I am making enough progress if I used all of the criteria".

These comments also expose a decreasing reliance on external cues and social feedback for information and affirmation about individual achievement. Post-intervention revealed only three of the 28 participants who identified the teacher as the sole means of recognising progress versus nine of the 28 participants at the pre-intervention stage. These findings strongly indicate that the students were now increasingly aware of the need to reflect cognitively on the processes involved in learning. Without critical thinking being of central importance to the process of Assessment for Learning (AfL), it is unlikely that students would have been enabled to change their understanding of what a good learner is and develop their skills accordingly.

Academic efficacy

In general, the most significant change in student academic efficacy was observed amongst what we, as the researchers, would have considered the 'reluctant' participants. These students vary in ability from extremely capable to the weaker end of the scale. Prior to the intervention, these students generally disliked participation in class discussions and rarely volunteered insights or answers. By contrast, post intervention, they are active and engaged students.

When analysing the answer to "Do you always try your best at your work?", findings revealed that 35% of participating students do not try to succeed if they have assumed that failure is inevitable. This was an area of major improvement as the post intervention survey revealed a decrease of 15% in this category.

Eagerness to learn

The increase in students responding positively to statement four highlights the associations between students' perception of clear learning targets, academic efficacy and their eagerness to learn. Wiliam et al., (2004) state that the use of learning targets will encourage and motivate children to learn and our data confirms this conclusion.

Comparative analysis

A comparative analysis of the results to the question, "What parts of your work would you

like to improve at?" highlights the increased awareness the students have with regard to their work. Pre-intervention, 22 of the 28 students remarked that they would like to improve their handwriting; 19 indicated that they would like to get an increased volume of work completed and a further 23 students mentioned decreasing the quantity of errors in their work. These areas of concern for the students display minimal awareness of the thinking process. The post-intervention results, in contrast to this, elicited statements such as, "I hope I can become better at knowing why I do stuff in maths… lots of times I get the answer right but only because teacher told us what to do". Another student explained that he would "like to be able to figure things out by himself". However these reflective responses are not indicative of all students within the research group and, despite their interaction with formative assessment practices, eight of the 28 children made no change to the aspect of their work that they would like to improve.

The questionnaire results reveal similar findings in relation to the children's concepts of what constitutes a good learner. At the pre-intervention stage, students commented that characteristics such as 'good writing', 'getting everything right', and 'knowing all the words' were attributes of 'good' work. The rationale behind these features being identified by the students is that they are visible features of work and easily measured and assessed both by themselves and their peers. The same question administered to the students in the post intervention questionnaire revealed a broadening of understanding of the concept of a good learner. Throughout the duration of the intervention, students had become increasingly aware that a 'good' learner was someone who "tries their best even if they are not good at something" someone "who thinks a lot even if they don't do much writing", and someone who "gets what the teacher is explaining". These findings would indicate that increased participation in formative assessment strategies alters children's perception of learning. This echoes the views of Elder and Paul (2007) who endorse formative assessment as a means of developing critical thinking and meta-cognition.

The questionnaire also revealed that the students' perception of their learning environment influenced their responses and approaches to learning activities. Children made claims such as: "I don't like when the class is serious for maths", "I like it when we do stuff with our friends, it's noisy… but fun", and "I like working best when everyone is concentrating and quiet, it helps me concentrate". These informative and contradictory statements highlight the unique learning approaches and styles of individual students. We believe that this emphasises the need for the teacher to cater for a range of learning styles to satisfy the needs of all the students in the class.

Conclusion

As a result of participating in explicit formative assessment instruction, the students participated in an integrated approach to assessment and instruction. With learning goals to the fore-front of lessons, the students constantly evaluated whether or not they were making expected progress and made adjustments to their learning as necessary. The students actively engaged in the learning experience and were encouraged to take ownership of it. They became increasingly autonomous learners, as they were equipped with the necessary strate-

gies and skills to evaluate their learning effectively. The use of rubrics, KWL charts, traffic lights, reviews and descriptive feedback, allowed students to identify what, why and how they were to proceed with a learning activity. The focus was no longer on the quantity of work completed, rather on the quality of the work undertaken by the individual student.

The classroom culture the students learn in was transformed as a result of formative assessment practices. Students were no longer anxious about making mistakes. Formative assessment created a culture that highlighted areas of strength, while simultaneously affirming the value of mistakes. This increased students' academic efficacy and improved motivation and eagerness to learn.

Classroom assessment as advocated by leading researchers (Black and Wiliam, 1998b; Shepard, 2000) should be integrated with the instructional process, so that teachers can understand and consolidate student learning. In view of this, a primary aim of this research was to build on the teacher's capacity in formative assessment practices. Formative assessment enabled the teacher to better identify students who were struggling, or who were operating under misunderstandings and misconceptions. Significantly, formative assessment generated a shift in the teacher student relationship, as the students became increasingly responsible for their learning; they became partners in the process of teaching and learning.

Formative assessment can provide information for improvement at all levels of the education system. At the classroom level teachers can be enabled to gather information about student learning and understanding. This can be used to improve and modify teaching to meet the needs of the students. At school level formative assessment provides the opportunity for school leadership to identify areas of strengths or weaknesses that exist across the school and develop policy and procedure for improvement. Formative assessment could also provide valuable information in relation to the current school evaluation policies (DES, 2011). For example, information gathered through formative assessment procedures, could monitor school progress and help to identify areas in need of development. This information could then be used to develop priorities for education.

An area of particular interest, within the research, was students' perceptions of the process of assessment. This data was gathered both pre and post intervention and even within a short timeframe, the views of the students had changed quite significantly.

In terms of whole school development and school improvement, we suggest that one area of progression would be to draft whole school policies regarding formative assessment. Such policies would validate the implementation of formative assessment at all class levels and outline practices and procedures appropriate to varying ages and abilities. This could be accompanied by a timeframe for operation to allow for consistency of practice. This would also integrate with current Department of Education and Skills (DES) policy in relation to *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Primary Schools* (2012).

The findings of this action research project strongly indicate that the inclusion of formative assessment practises can have a positive impact on students' academic efficacy and eagerness to learn. Through active participation in AfL, students can be enabled to become more engaged, autonomous and motivated learners. Therefore, we encourage other teachers to formally introduce the processes of AfL within their classrooms. While this is the conclusion of this study, it is a beginning of a bigger endeavour to continue with the

processes of formative assessment and to encourage other practitioners across all levels of education to do likewise.

References

Bennett, R.E. (2011). Formative Assessment: a Critical Review'. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*. 18(1) 5-25.

Bem, D.J. (1972). Self-Perception Theory in L. Berkowitz (Ed.) *Advances in. Experimental Social Psychology*, 6. 1-62.

Black, P., and Wiliam, D. (1998a). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 5 (1) 7-73.

Black, P., and Wiliam, D. (1998b). *Inside the Black Box – Raising standards through Classroom Assessment*. Phi Delta Kappan, 80 (2) 139-144 London, King's College.

Black, P., and Wiliam, D. (2009). Developing the Theory of Formative Assessment. *Educational Assessment Evaluation and Accountability*, 21, 5-31.

British Education Research Association (BERA) (2011). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Nottingham: BERA.

Bruner, J. (1960). *The Process of Education: A Landmark in Educational Theory*. London: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1966). Some Elements of Discovery Thinking. *The Journal of Philosophy for Children*, 3 (1) 26-31.

Carr, W., and Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*. Lewes, Falmer.

Department of Education and Science (1999). *Primary School Curriculum*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (2000). *Learning Support Guidelines*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Skills (2011). *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Skills (2012) *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines for Primary Schools*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Elder, L., and Paul, R. (2007). Critical Thinking: The Art of Socratic Questioning, Part III. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 31 (3) 34-35.

Elder, L., and Paul, R. (2008). Critical Thinking: Strategies for Improving Student Learning. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 32 (1) 32-33.

Goodrich, H. (1998). Understanding Rubrics. *Educational Leadership*, 54 (4) pp. 14-18.

Harlen, W. (2005). Teachers' Summative Practices and Assessment for Learning – tensions and synergies. *The Curriculum Journal*, 16 (2) 207-223.

Henk, W., and Melnick, S. (1995). The Reader Self-perception Scale (RSPS): A new tool for measuring how children feel about themselves as readers. *The Reading Teacher*, 48 (6) 470-482.

Herman, L., Osmundson, E., and Silver, D. (2010). *Capturing Formative Assessment in Practice: Measurement Challenges.* CRESST Report 770: National Centre for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).

Koshy, V. (2005). *Action Research for Improving Practice: A Practical Guide*. London; Sage Publications.

LeCompte, M., and Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*. San Diego: Academic Press

McNiff, J., and Whitehead, J. (2009). *Doing and Writing Action Research*. London: Sage Publications.

NCCA (2007). *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum – Guidelines for Schools*. Dublin: NCCA.

Nicol, D., and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative Assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31 (2) 199-218.

OECD (2010). *PISA 2009 at a Glance*, Paris: OECD Publishing.

O'Leary, M. (2006). *Towards a Balanced Assessment System for Irish Primary and Secondary Schools*. Oideas, 52.

Pollard, A. (1996). *Reading for Reflective Teaching in the Primary School*. London, Cassell.

Popham, W.J. (2006). *Defining and Enhancing Formative Assessment: AfL Formative Assessment Where it Counts*. University of California, Los Angeles.

Popham, W.J. (2008) *Transformative Assessment*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Ross, J.A. (2006). *The Reliability, Validity and Unity of Self-Assessment*. Practical Assessment Research and Evaluation, 11 (10).

Rudduck, J., and Flutter, J. (2004). *How to Improve your School: Giving pupils a voice.* London: Continuum.

Schunk, D.H. (2004). *Learning Theories: An Educational Perspective*. Upper Saddle River, N.J: Merrill Prentice/Hall.

Scott, J. (2000). Children as Respondents. The Challenge for Quantitative Methods, in Christensen, P., and James, A. (Eds.) *Conducting Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices* (First Edition). New York: Routledge Falmer, 98-119.

Stiggins, R.J. (2001). *Student-involved classroom assessment*, (3rd Edition). Upper Saddle River, N.J; Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Stiggins, R. (2007). *Assessment through the Student's Eyes: Educational Leadership*, 64(8), pp. 22-26.

Stiggins, R., and Popham, W.J. (2008). *Assessing Students' Affect Related to Assessment for Learning: An Introduction for Teachers.* University of California, Los Angeles.

Stringer, E.T. (2007). *Action Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Thompson, S., and Thompson, N. (2008). *The Critically Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Torrence, H., and Pryor, J. (2001). Developing Formative Assessment in the Classroom: Using Action Research to Explore and Modify Theory. *British Education Research Journal*, 27 (5), 615-631.

Wiliam, D., Lee, C., Harrison, C., and Black, P. (2004). Teachers developing assessment for learning: Impact on student achievement. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 11 (1), 49-65.

Wood, M. (2011). *Closer to the Ground: Pupil 'Voice' and the Developments of Knowledge about Schools*. United Kingdom, York St John University.

An evaluation of the utility of homework in Irish primary school classrooms

JOANNE JACKSON AND LORRAINE HARBISON

Abstract

This paper examines the current practice and effectiveness of administering homework in Irish primary schools. The value of homework was explored from three perspectives. A literature review provided the evidence for and the background to administering homework. School policies from a cluster sample of three schools were studied and areas of agreement and discordance identified. A convenience sample of 90 parents was surveyed using a questionnaire based on the literature review findings. The questionnaire contained both single response items on a Likert Scale and free response questions. Responses were documented, data analysed and recommendations proposed. We concluded that it is not the giving of homework per se that is of value but that the type of homework that is administered is more important. Homework that is too difficult; takes too long to complete, or is seen to be inappropriate or of no relevance to the child, may actually have an adverse effect.

Keywords: **homework, parents, home-school communication, supports for learning**

Introduction

Teaching senior infants as a newly qualified teacher is full of rewards and more than a few challenges. One of particular note is the daily preparation and administration of homework which appears to impact substantially on the discretionary time available to me. Rather than settling for continuing with practice on the basis that it is the established norm, I sought to research more widely to ascertain whether giving homework is of value or whether this time could be put to better use to support teaching and learning in my classroom.

In so doing, this research set out to evaluate the utility of homework in the primary school classroom by the following:

- reviewing the literature to establish the theoretical background and empirical evidence for giving homework,
- studying documents on homework developed by state bodies,
- analysing the content of homework school policies,
- obtaining the opinions of a sample of parents through the use of questionnaires, and
- finally, ascertaining the utility of homework through a summation of the data collected.

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

Homework in the primary school

Homework has been a recurrent cause for debate with radically different opinions prevailing from time to time which tended to depict homework as either all good or all bad (Gill and Schlossman, 2000). In the early 20th century, homework was understood to be an important means for aiding knowledge acquisition. Rote memorisation was viewed as a desirable if not essential key skill for children to develop and so tasks were set for homework such as learning spellings, tables or dates off by heart (Cooper, 2001). In contrast to this, medical practitioners in the mid-1990s insisted that it would be more beneficial for children to have free time to play outdoors and argued that initiative and interest in learning were substantially more important than the accumulation of factual knowledge (Bennett and Kalish, 2006). It was against this backdrop that the *Primary School Curriculum* was introduced, a curriculum that prioritises understanding over the rote memorisation of facts (NCCA, 1999, p. 7). However, although not mandatory, and despite changes to the curriculum and innovation in technology, the practice of giving homework remains commonplace throughout our education system and appears to sit quite comfortably with the desire to develop children's metacognitive skills (Rudman, 2014, p.13).

Homework and attainment

And so begs the question, does homework actually raise standards? Cooper et al., (2006) concluded that, "With only rare exceptions, the relationship between the amount of homework students do and their achievement outcomes was found to be positive and statistically significant" (Cooper et al., 2006, p.47). Farrow et al., (1999) cast a shadow over these findings as they note that children who completed homework once a month in the core areas of mathematics, English and science had higher test scores than those who reported doing homework more frequently. This evidence draws into question the ritual daily administration of homework in favour of a weekly based task. Van Voorhis (2004) more specifically states that the younger the child, the less benefit from doing homework on a daily basis. The findings go further to recommend that the nature of homework needs to adapt to suit the age profile of the child with a shift away from repetitive, mundane, independent tasks to interactive assignments that allow a few days for completion (Van Voorhis, 2004, p.207).

Purposes of homework

Although there is little evidence to support the theory that homework actually improves educational performance in the primary school, there are many purposes cited for administering same. These include; developing children's dispositions to learn, fostering self-organisation, supporting independent problem-solving skills, encouraging children to take learning beyond the constraints of the classroom and to see the importance of school work in their own lives (Cooper, 2007).

However, these positive outcomes rely on homework that is appropriate in terms of both quantity and quality. Homework that is lacking in clarity and purpose undermines good attitudes and motivation to achieve. If it takes too long to complete, then this can lead to a loss of interest in the task. Furthermore, large amounts of homework can lead to physical and emotional fatigue (Marzano and Pickering, 2007; Cooper, 2007).

Parental involvement and home school links

One of the more contentious issues in the debate is the extent to which parents should be involved in supporting their child's homework completion (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, p.195). It could possibly be deduced that school work, done at home, somehow acknowledges and recognises the role of parents, and not the teacher, as the primary educator of their child (Government of Ireland, 2004, pp.167-168). This key role that parents play in their child's education is emphasised in both the Primary School Curriculum and more recently, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (NCCA, 1999, p.21; Department of Education and Skills, (DES), 2011, pp.19-26). Although homework is not discussed directly, the strategy states that "The support of parents who are engaged in their child's learning has a significant positive impact on a child's educational achievement, especially in literacy and numeracy" (DES, 2011, p.19).

It is "essential" that there is a close co-operation between the home and school "if children are to receive the maximum benefit from the curriculum" (NCCA, 1999, p.21). Studies have shown that "parental involvement in a child's learning has more of an impact on a child's educational outcomes than social class, level of parental education or income" and can lead to a 15% improvement in children's educational attainment levels (Feinstein and Symons, 1999, cited in National Parents Council (NPCa, p.2; Desforges, 2003).

Involvement in homework can be seen as a facilitator of communication and regular link between home and school. Teachers can use homework to develop a practical partnership with parents and to increase parental appreciation of schooling. It gives parents an opportunity to show an interest in the academic progress of their child and to get involved in their child's learning (NPCb, p.2).

Whereas communication between the home and school is indeed important, homework may not be the best method for forging such links. 'Serious concerns' were raised by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) about the impact of homework both on teaching time and the erosion of quality time between parent and child at home (IPPN, 2010, p.4). The greatest reported drawback of homework for many parents is the strain it places on family life (Kralovec and Buell, 2000). "The burden of too much homework, parents uncertain about how to help, and forgotten assignments" all lead to family tensions (Van Voorhis, 2004). Parental interference coupled with unrealistically high expectations of their child during homework time may cause undue pressure, arguments in the home and a negative impact on the whole family environment (Bennett and Kalish, 2006). Homes become second classrooms in which parents feel required to act as teacher or to police children's homework completion, and children are put under pressure to constantly perform with little or no space left to engage in undirected activity in which they may discover interests that could last a lifetime (Paton, 2010; Marzano and Pickering, 2007).

Homework policies

A very real danger that pervades this debate is that inappropriate homework may even decrease children's educational achievement and as such, "schools should strengthen their policies to ensure that teachers use homework properly" (Marzano and Pickering, 2007, p.76). Whereas there are no official guidelines for schools about homework, they are

recommended to have a policy on the matter. As far back as 1990, the DES, known at the time as the Department of Education and Science, issued a circular which stated that, "Parents should be made aware of the school homework policy and there should be tips and guidelines for parents on how they can assist" (DES, 1990, p.4). Little has changed, as nearly a quarter of a century later, advice on the DES website for parents states that "homework is an important part of learning and it is important to encourage your child to do his or her homework each evening" (Donnelly, 2010).

There is consistency across the literature as to the nature of a good homework policy. Policies should be concise and unambiguous and take into consideration the age of the pupil, the quality and quantity of the work and the time it will take to complete. It is recommended that the learning intention is clearly stated along with the success criteria. The policy should be relevant to the needs of the pupils acknowledging the different cognitive and emotional abilities of children and these differences should be reflected in the purpose, content, frequency and duration of homework tasks. It should also specify the role that children, parents and teachers are expected to play (NPCb.; Cooper, 2007; Van Voorhis, 2004).

Of further importance is that the entire school community, including parents and children, should be consulted in devising the homework policy, a policy that should be clearly communicated to staff, children and parents, particularly at the time of enrolment (New South Wales (NSW), 2013; Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST, 2007). However, a concern to note from the literature reviewed to this point, is the absence of the voice of the teacher, and more importantly, the voice of the child, in the discussion, although homework policies would recommend that children be involved from the outset. Best practice would further suggest that in order to support children's learning, in and out of school, understanding the child's view about homework and their homework behaviours is critical (Hong et al., 2011).

Key participants' understanding of homework

There appears to be an underlying assumption by adults that, "homework is useful for promoting learning without even inquiring into the experience of the learners themselves" (Kohn, 2007, p.3). 'Popular' opinion would hold that "homework is (fundamentally) the job of children", an opinion reiterated by children who liken "the homework process to doing household chores" (Corno and Xu, 2004, p. 227; Marzano and Pickering, 2007, p.74; Van Voorhis, 2004, p.207). For others, it is simply to avoid getting into trouble and to please their teacher or parent (Coutts, 2004, p.184; Warton, 2001, p.161). Therefore, if homework is to be deemed in any way important by children, then it must have some form of intrinsic value (Warton, 2001, p.162). Homework should not be limited to paper and pencil solitary exercises. Instead, homework could offer opportunities than are more learner-driven and more relevant to daily life (Gill and Shlossman, 2000, p.50).

So the challenge for teachers is "to ensure that homework is enjoyed, valued, and not seen as a disliked solitary activity" (Warton, 2001, p.164). However, it is not uncommon for teachers to also dislike homework. Coutts quotes a teacher who goes as far as to say that they 'hate' giving homework, correcting homework and even supervising homework in the capacity as parent (Coutts, 2004, p.183). The reason they give for assigning homework is

that parents judge teachers on how much homework they give. Teachers who give a lot of homework are deemed to be better than those who don't (Coutts, 2004, p.183; Hong et. al., 2011, p.282 and p.284; IPPN, 2010, p.4).

For the most part, the main intention in assigning homework appears to be to foster good work habits in the early years of school with common practice for primary school teachers to assign very small tasks on a regular basis "in order to establish a routine" (Coutts, 2004, p.187). As laudable as this intention is, it does however diminish the value attributed to homework. Homework isn't limited to those occasions when it seems appropriate and important, it has all been decided at the start of the year that the children will have homework to do every night and "later on we'll figure out what to make them do" (Kohn, 2007, p.1).

It is evident from the literature that reform of homework is needed. Whilst homework should remain challenging and rigorous, it needs to be brought in line with the best of progressive pedagogical theory. This means trying to make homework more creative, more experiential, more collaborative, and more oriented to opportunities offered by families, communities, and environments if homework is to be designed with 'enrichment' in mind (Gill and Shlossman, 2000, p.50)

The present study

The present study is limited to analysing in greater depth two key areas of the literature review, that of parents' understanding of the utility of homework in tandem with the analysis of three school homework policy documents. This is a small scale study of 90 completed questionnaires and a review of three school policies. A higher number of questionnaires and school policies analysed may have yielded different results and so may not be generalised to reflect the practices, opinions and attitudes of all parents towards homework in primary schools. A further limitation is the absence of the voice of both children and teachers as this went beyond the scope of this study.

Methodology

The population upon which the survey is focused refers to parents of junior infants to sixth class pupils in a convenience sample of primary schools in a suburb of Dublin. Questionnaires were distributed as they generate data in an efficient manner, and tend to be descriptive and honest (Cohen et al., 2000).

The questions were drafted and pre-tested and amendments were made as required. The questionnaire was then piloted and further adjustments were made. Careful consideration was given during the development, piloting and re-drafting stages of the questionnaire to remove leading and ambiguous questions. Further issues that were taken into consideration included: the costs incurred through photocopying and postage, and the lack of data from non-returned surveys. The questionnaire included questions in both closed and open form. A Likert Scale was used in the questionnaire to determine extent of agreement. As the questions were highly structured in order to elicit the required information, the questionnaire

offered two free response questions at the end which enabled respondents to make additional comments if they wished.

Following a code of ethics ensured that the research had integrity, credibility and confidentiality (Walliman, 2006). The parents were assured that questionnaires completed would be anonymous and confidential. Questionnaire respondents were fully informed regarding the nature of the research and the purpose for which the questionnaires were being carried out. Consent was sought from the respondents to allow their data to be used in the research project.

Interpretation of results

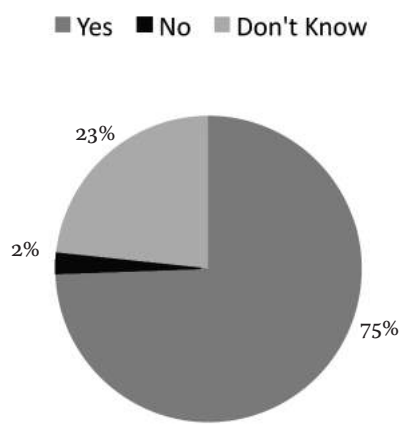
A high response rate of 74% was achieved during this research. According to Fincham (2008) a response rate of approximately 60% should be the goal of researchers. The high response rate of this research may be an indication of the controversial nature and the interest that parents have in the practice of homework.

The results are pulled together under four themes that align with the headings in the literature review. These are: parental awareness of policy, value of homework, parental involvement, and finally, impact at home.

Homework policies

Parents were asked if the school in which their child attended had a homework policy.

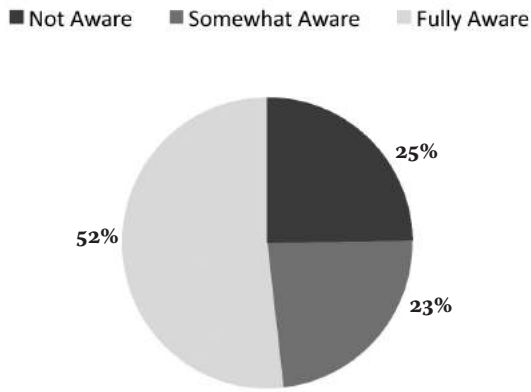
Fig 1: Homework policy



Contrary to best practice as indicated in the literature review, it is evident that not all parents were involved in compiling the school's homework policy as one quarter of the respondents did not know if their school had a policy on homework or not.

Of the 75% of parents who indicated that their child's school had a policy on homework, nearly a third of them were not comfortably familiar with the contents of same.

Fig 2: Awareness of homework policy



A respondent noted that homework "can be stressful if it's not very clear exactly what is to be done – How much help should a parent give?"

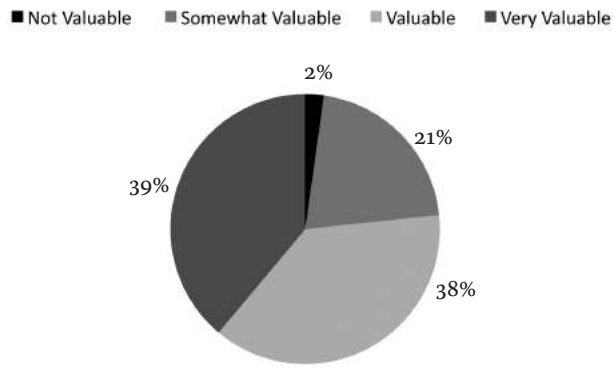
The value of homework

All homework policies studied affirmed the importance of homework at the beginning. Policy one listed two reasons as to why homework is important; "to reinforce what the child learns during the day", and "to provide a link between teacher and parent". Policy two summarised the importance of homework in the following statement. To "consolidate work done in school that day and to provide further practice on certain topics in the curriculum". Policy three listed five reasons why homework is assigned to children. They stated that homework is assigned for the following reasons:

- It allows pupils the opportunity to revisit, revise and consolidate skills learned in class.
- It can help pupils to make more rapid progress in learning.
- It can involve parents and family in the pupil's work, to their mutual benefit.
- It gives pupils an opportunity for independent learning and study.
- It forms a link with the methods of study crucial to success at secondary school and in later life.

Whether or not the respondents were aware of the school's homework policy, there was almost unanimous agreement that homework was valuable with 98% of respondents agreeing that homework had some value, and a substantial percentage viewing homework as 'very valuable'.

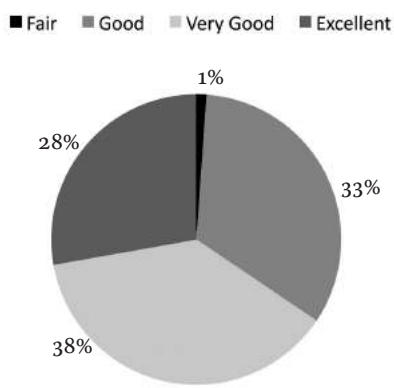
Fig 3: Is homework valuable?



Many respondents wrote about the importance of homework as a form of ensuring parental involvement in their child's learning. "It helps the parents to get involved in the kids' education". Respondents felt more involved as they could see the teaching methods through homework and utilise the same methodology in the home. It "familiarises the parents with the school teaching practice e.g. using phonics so that the parent can use the same method at home".

Many respondents noted the importance of homework as it provides quality time for parents and children to work together. It is "important one to one time with the child" and "It opens up conversation between the child and parent". All except 1% of respondents believed that homework provided a good link between home and school.

Fig 4: Home/school link

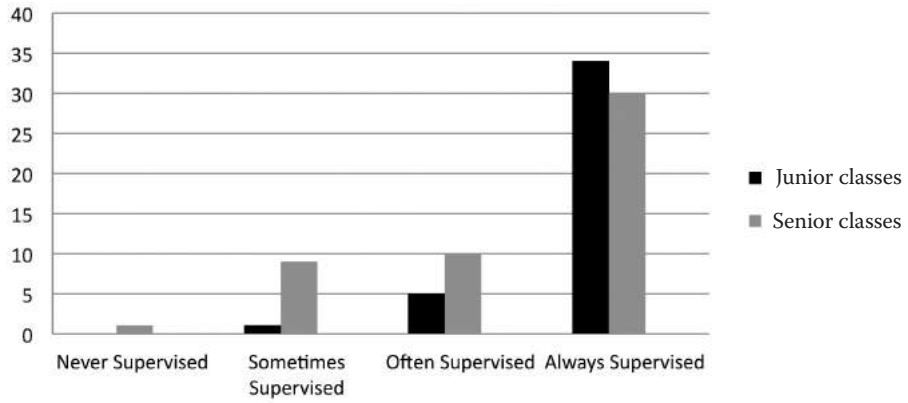


Some respondents wrote about the benefits of homework as a way of identifying their child's weaknesses and strengths. "It gives a good indication on how the student is getting on," "It makes me aware of areas where my child is struggling." Respondents view homework as a means of evaluating their child's ability and to keep tabs on their child's progress. "We believe homework helps parents evaluate what level of aptitude their children have."

Parental involvement

All three homework policies indicated that parents were expected to supervise their child's homework but not to complete the activities for their child. Most parents, 85%, always supervised their children from junior infants to second class. Even at the upper end of the school, 60% of parents consistently monitored their child's homework.

Fig 5: Supervision of homework



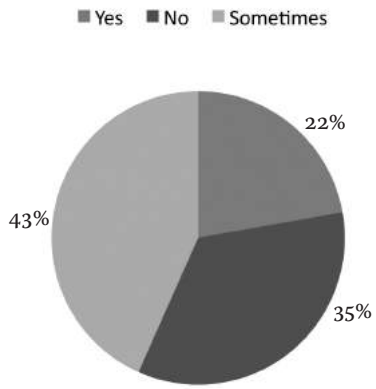
Homework policy three listed six expectations of parents. This school asked parents to support homework by the following:

- providing space and time for their child to do their homework. Turn off the television and radio until the homework is finished,
- checking that the homework is completed and signing the homework journal,
- discussing interesting aspects of the work assigned,
- using the method suggested by the teacher for the learning of spellings,
- regularly checking memorisation of tables,
- informing teachers of problems when they arise.

Homework policy one stated that "parents can play an important role in listening to reading and items to be learned, ensuring that this work is done well". They also outline a homework meeting which is designed to discuss the homework that will be given to their child in that year and what expectations the teacher has for the coming year.

Despite school policy indicating that parents need only act somewhat like bystanders in the homework process, this does not appear to be parents' perception of their role. In fact, 65% of parents revealed that they do not feel in a position to fully support their children with their homework.

Fig 6: Do parents need support?



A respondent noted that there is not "always a clear expectation of what is expected from the child in respect to homework and how stretching it should be".

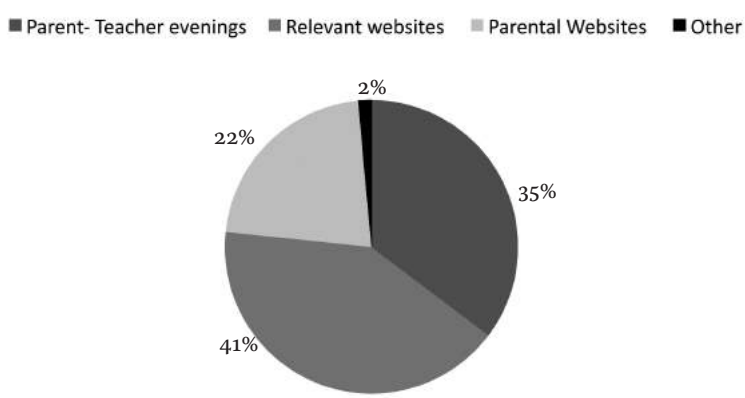
Many respondents voiced their concern about the specific subjects that their children were getting for homework. "I have an issue with Irish homework as I am from the North and have no Irish." Another respondent voiced his concern about maths. "Some of the maths is now being taught a different way to the way the child's parents were taught! A brief workshop or meeting would be of value here."

This was reiterated by another respondent who noted the difficulty they too had with Gaeilge and sometimes maths. "I'd like basic concepts of maths subtraction/addition etc. as teaching methods vary and I get confused with the crossing out, borrow one etc."

Parents feel they have to teach these concepts to children during homework time, however, none of the homework policies expect parents to do this. On the contrary, homework policy one stated that, "It is important that class teachers can see if and where children may need extra help and/or if further explanation in any subject topic is required".

This led to the next question as to how best to support parents to overcome perceived obstacles.

Fig 7: What support is needed?

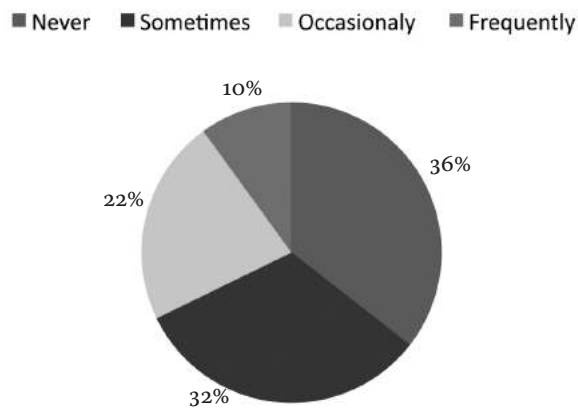


Responses ranged from, "some links on the school webpage to give ideas on how to avoid homework creating arguments at home" to "parent-teacher evenings might help as the teacher knows how the child performs academically and provide advice to the parent on how best to approach the homework so that the child gets the best out of it". One respondent stated that there was no "one size fits all support for parents", and suggested that "the required support could range from meetings with teacher to more specific workshops or website information".

Impact on home life

Perhaps the most shocking statistic that came to the fore from this research was that almost two thirds of parents put forward the view that homework caused some friction at home.

Fig 8: Does homework create upsest between child and parent?



One reason cited for this was that homework was "consistently too difficult for the child". The level of complexity was reiterated by yet another respondent who wrote that homework should be "pitched to be stretching yet achievable" and "an opportunity to challenge children with parental assistance however this is not utilised".

Only homework policy two mentioned any form of differentiated homework. It stated that if parents felt that their child was struggling, they should make an appointment with the class teacher to discuss "potential modifications and strategies to help children complete their homework assignments successfully". None of the other school policies studied mentioned the idea of differentiated homework. What is a shame is that "whilst learning in school (has) apparently become more varied, more differentiated and more imaginative, learning outside of the school (seems) to be stuck in a time warp where the tasks lack a quality of thinking as to the needs of the learner" (Henderson, 2006, cited in Czerniawski and Kidd, 2013, p.7).

The nature of the homework brief also caused tension. "It needs to be of value and not as a completion of workbook exercises". Homework "is often repetitive and task orientated which causes complaint". As such, teachers need to avoid the temptation to make completion

of work begun in the classroom as part of homework, in order to counteract the effects of curriculum overload (Coutts, 2004, p.187; NCCA, 2010).

Perhaps a more common complaint was the duration or length of time spent on homework completion. "They can have an hour of homework which is too much for an eight year old." Following up on the time allocated for homework, two of the homework policy documents studied indicated similar time guidelines outlined as follows:

Junior infants: 10-15 minutes.
Senior infants: 15-20 minutes.
1st and 2nd classes: 20-30 minutes.
3rd and 4th classes: 30-45 minutes.
5th and 6th classes: 45-60 minutes.

When asked about the reasonableness of otherwise of the amount of homework that was set, no respondents indicated that the quantity was unreasonable.

Fig 9: Junior infants to second class

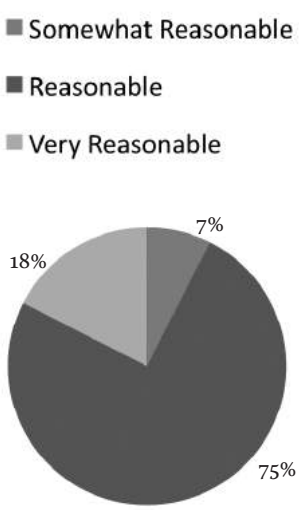
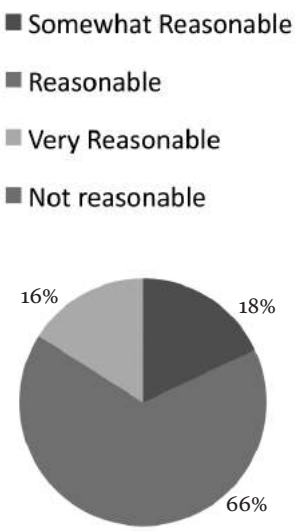


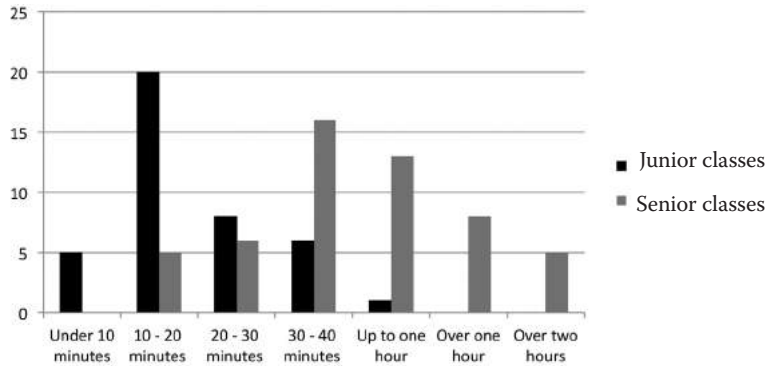
Fig 10: Third to sixth class



However, one respondent commented that although valuable, "it should be short so children can have time to do other activities."

In line with school policy, the majority of children ranging from junior infants to second class finish their homework in ten to 20 minutes extending to 30 or 40 minutes in the middle and senior classes. However, in some cases, it has taken children an inordinate length of time to complete, with nearly 15% of respondents indicating that it can take over one hour and sometimes two hours to complete the quantity of homework assigned to them.

Fig 11: Duration of homework

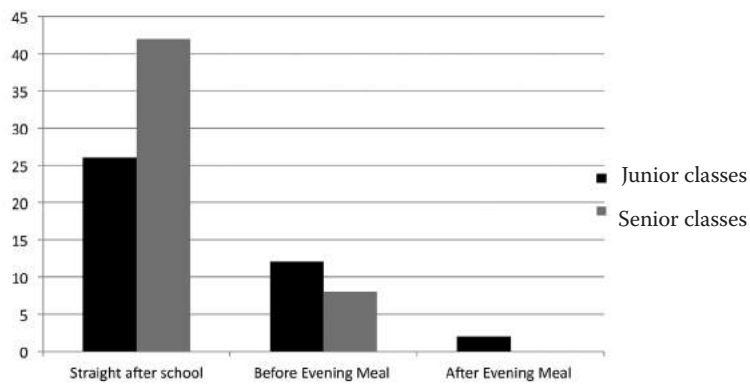


What needs to be considered, therefore, is if parents think that the quantity of homework that their children are getting is reasonable, then why can it take children so long to complete it?

Of concern is that homework is frequently used as a means for both punishing and/or praising children (Czerniawski and Kidd, 2013). All three homework policies analysed state that extra homework will be assigned to children during the week or even at weekends if the teacher deems that the child is not giving due attention and regard to their work. On the other hand, children are rewarded with a night off homework for special efforts made by an individual. Both carrot and stick approaches reinforce an extremely negative viewpoint that homework is something to be endured, rather than valued.

Motivation, therefore, appears to be one of the key factors that can impact negatively on homework completion. Respondents wrote that homework completion can take too long and this caused upset. "When you spend too long on something, the child gets upset and agitated; this is not good for the child or the parent." Some noted that homework is only beneficial when children are motivated and willing to complete it. "On days when the children are willing it creates few problems and gets completed in a reasonable time. However, if tired, it can be like pulling teeth!" Hence, it is not surprising to note that the preference was for children to do homework directly after school to free the children up for the rest of the afternoon.

Fig 12: What time of the day is homework completed?



Discussion

This study sought to evaluate whether the current practice of giving homework in Irish primary schools was of any merit or simply a traditional practice, the effectiveness and value of which has been assumed rather than proven. We hoped to shed some light on the controversy by pulling together the data collected and analyse and compare this to the literature.

Key findings

- The high response rate from the questionnaires could indicate that homework is an issue amongst parents.
- Although school policies were present in every school surveyed, respondents did not think that they were adequately informed, if at all, and were generally unaware of the content of these policies.
- Some parents thought that they were expected to act as experts regarding content or to attempt to teach the content, although this was not the intention identified in any of the school policies analysed.
- The majority of parents agreed that the amount of homework that their child was given was reasonable, although there was less agreement about the nature of the homework tasks assigned and length of time required to complete same.
- The high percentage of parents who stated that homework can cause friction in the family is a concern.
- Teachers should customise the assignment tasks to fit pupils' learning styles and also interests. Homework assignments should be considerate of children's needs; it should be differentiated to ensure success (Vatterott, 2011).
- Homework is only valuable if it benefits children's learning and if, in addition, it supports home school links.
- The efficacy and usefulness of school homework policies is questionable. Perhaps a recommendation that could be drawn from these findings would be to send a relevant and abridged version of the homework policy to all parents.
- Homework must have a clear purpose. It must be efficient showing evidence of valuable learning and good use of time (Vatterott, 2011).
- Homework should promote ownership and have good aesthetic appeal to motivate children (Vatterott, 2011).
- Although consensus in support of homework use has yet to be attained, it remains a pervasive pedagogical strategy in schools (Hong et al., 2011, p.282).

Conclusion

Homework remains a central part of the primary school curriculum that affects teachers and teaching, children and learning, families and home-school communication. Despite this reality, there is limited evidence on the utility of homework. As with the findings of Van Voorhis (2004), too little attention has been given to the purposes of homework and communication between home and school about homework policies. Communication should work both ways, but all the literature refers to home-school communication in

relation to homework rather than what could really be deemed the more appropriate term, school-home!

A number of key themes arose during the questionnaire, namely the lack of knowledge of the expectations of parents, partially due to the homework policy being poorly communicated to parents and the juxtaposition of positive and negative views of homework amongst parents. Even more disappointing, is the absence of the voice of the child in the debate although the curriculum advocates that children should be active agents in their own learning rather than submissive partakers. What is apparent is that radical overhaul of homework needs to take place and it is vital that all involved are given opportunities to voice opinions in order to develop the most effective strategies possible which will maximise children's learning potential.

Bibliography

Anonymous, n/d. *Evaluate Homework*. Retrieved from: http://evaluatehomework.weebly.com/hmwk-policies.html (Accessed 10 June 2013).

Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2000). *Research Methods in Education Fifth Edition*. New York: Routledge Falmer.

Cooper, H. (2007). *The battle over homework: Common ground for Administrators, Teachers and Parents*. California: Corwin Press.

Cooper, H., Robinson, J., and Patall, E.A. (2006). Does Homework Improve Academic Achievement? A Synthesis of Research, 1987-2003. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(1), 1-62.

Cooper, H. (2001). Homework for All – in Moderation. *Educational Leadership*, 58(7), 34-38.

Corno, L., and Xu, J. (2004). Homework as the job of childhood. *Theory into Practice*, 43(3), 227-233.

Coutts, P.M. (2004). Meanings of Homework and Implications for Practice. *Theory into Practice*, 43(3), 182-188.

Czerniawski, G., and Kidd, W. (2013). *Homework for Learning: 300 Practical Strategies*. UK: Open University Press.

DES (1990). Circular letter 20/90. Retrieved from: www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/pc20_90.pdf (Accessed 12 June 2013).

DES (2011). *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among children and young people 2011-2020*. Dublin: DES.

Desforges, C., and Abouchaar, A. (2003). *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review*. UK: DfES Publications.

Donnelly, K. (2010). *Primary School Homework of No Real Benefit, Says Principals*. Retrieved from: www.independent.ie/lifestyle/education/primary-school-homework-of-no-real-benefit-say-principals-26688001.html (Accessed 15 February 2013).

Farrow, S., Tymms, P., and Henderson, B. (1999). Homework and Attainment in Primary Schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 25 (3), 323-341.

Fincham, J.E. (2008). *Response Rates and Responsiveness for Surveys, Standards and the Journal*. Retrieved from: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2384218/ (Accessed 12 June 13).

Gill, B., and Schlossman, S. (2000). The Lost Cause of Homework Reform. *Americal Journal of Education*, 109(1), 27–62.

Government of Ireland (2012). *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, 166-167. Dublin: Government Publications.

Hong, E., Wan, M., and Peng, Y. (2011). Discrepencies between Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Homework. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 22(2), 280-308.

IPPN (2010). *Submission on Curriculum Reform*. Dublin: The Joint Oireachtas Committee for Education.

Kalish, N., and Bennett, S. (2007). *The case against homework: How homework is hurting our children and what we can do about it*. Chicago: Three Rivers Press.

Kralovec, E., and Buell, J. (2000). *The End of Homework: How homework disrupts families, overburdens children, and limits learning*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Kohn, A. (2007). *Rethinking Homework*. Retrieved from: www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/rethinkinghomework.htm (Accessed 12 June 2014).

Marzano, R.J., and Pickering, D.J. (2007). The Case For and Against Homework. *Educational Leadership*, 64, 74–79.

National Adult Literacy Agency (2013). *Help My Kid Learn*. Retrieved from: www.helpmykidlearn.ie/ (Accessed 18 June 2013).

NCCA (1999). *Primary School Curriculum Introduction*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

NCCA (2010). *Curriculum Overload in Primary Schools. An overview of national and international experiences*. Retrieved from: www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Primary_School_Curriculum/PSN_Curriculum_Overload/Overview_national_international_experiences.pdf (Accessed 12 June 2014).

NPC (a). *Getting Involved in Your Child's Education: The Why and How of 'Parental Involvement'*. Retrieved from: www.npc.ie/attachments/21196d07-39c1-40c6-9600-395fe20c3774.PDF (Accessed 4 June 2014).

NPC (b). *Homework*. Retrieved from: www.npc.ie/attachments/3b19a148-cddc-4d73-8185-90419641423a.PDF (Accessed 4 June 2014).

NSW (2013). *Curriculum and Learning Innovation Centre – Homework and the Curriculum State of New South Wales*. Retrieved from: www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/policies/homework/index.htm (Accessed 18 June 2013).

PDST (2007). Homework Policy. Retrieved from: http://ppds_en.educast.ie/index.php?option=com_contentandtask=view&id=101&Itemid=187 (Accessed 12 March 2013).

Rudman, N.P.C. (2014). A review of homework literature as a precursor to practitioner-led doctoral research in a primary school. *Research in Education*, 91, 12-26.

Van Voorhis, F.L. (2004). Reflecting on the Homework Ritual: Assignments and Designs. *Theory into Practice*, 43 (3), 205-212.

Warton, P.L. (2001). The Forgotten Voices in Homework: Views of Students. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(3), 155-165.

Hoover-Demspey, K.V., Battiato, A.C., Walker, J.M.T., Reed, R.P., DeJong, J.M., and Jones, K.P. (2001). Parental Involvement in Homework. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(3), 195-209.

The challenges, dilemmas and opportunities associated with implementing inclusion in an Irish primary school: the school stakeholders' perspective

CONOR MULCAHY

Abstract

This paper is a small scale examination of the realities of implementing Inclusion in a rural primary school in 21st century Ireland. The understanding of the key school stakeholders of inclusion as a concept as well as their experiences including children with special education needs is explored through a series of interviews. The data is examined in relation to a review of some of the relevant literature associated with the subject of inclusion and the education of children with special education needs from the leadership, mainstream teaching and special needs assistant perspectives.

Keywords: **inclusion, understanding, stakeholder, attitudes, planning**

Context of paper

Over the past few years there has been a large increase in the inclusion of children with special education needs (SEN) in mainstream primary schools across Ireland. This has been a time of upheaval and changing attitudes amongst stakeholders involved in educating these children. Now more than ever, education staff are facing up to the dilemmas that come with inclusion and turning everyday challenges that occur into opportunities to enrich the learning for all pupils and improve training and expertise of all staff. In this project I wanted to examine some of these challenges, dilemmas and opportunities that exist in this era of inclusion from the perspectives of special needs assistants (SNAs), teachers and school management. I focused my study on a small school in the aftermath of a very contentious period following the arrival of two children with very challenging emotional/behavioural difficulties. I wanted to see if there was any evidence that the experience of this challenging period caused a change in attitudes among the staff in the school. Within the context of the school I wanted to try and get a sense of some of the challenges and dilemmas that the staff had to navigate and see if any opportunities presented themselves along the way.

The first thing I did was read a selection of the literature available on the SNA, teacher and management perspectives regarding inclusion. This gave me a good sense of how

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

inclusion as a concept has really gained traction over the past few years and how there is a large volume of work available from all of the different perspectives this project focuses on.

For the data I needed to analyse, I asked the management, teachers and SNAs in the school the same questions but I asked them to consider their own particular perspective when answering the questions. I wanted to know what their understanding of inclusion as a concept was. Did they believe that every child could be educated in a mainstream class? Had their attitudes towards inclusion changed in the past two years or because of their experiences with particular children? Could they detail any particular successes they may have had including a child with SEN in the school? Finally, did they have any thoughts on what was needed to be done to improve inclusive practices in the school into the future.

Inclusion in the primary school: a brief examination of the literature

Teacher perspective

In her paper studying decision making in special education meetings, Rogers (2002) describes the processes that occur when school staff, parents, and professionals come together to plan for the inclusion of children with special education needs. She discovered that teachers tended to choose the narratives that best suited them at the time within their own institutional constraints. De Boer (2011) recognises the key role that teachers play in inclusive education and how the successful implementation of inclusive practices in schools relies heavily on positive attitudes from teachers. In her review of 26 studies regarding teacher attitudes to inclusion, she identifies issues relating to a lack of experience with children with SEN and a lack of specific training for types of disabilities encountered.

Regarding the preparing of teachers for inclusive education, Florian and Linklater (2010) make the point that the question is not what the teachers need to know or if they have sufficient knowledge to work in inclusive classrooms, but how best can they make use of what they already know to help learners experiencing difficulties. This 'inclusive pedagogy' extends the routine classroom activities and life to cater for all needs. They speak of the "new way of thinking about teaching", taking the challenges associated with teaching children with SEN and turning them into learning experiences for all.

Shevlin et al (2012) looked at the opportunities and challenges associated with the development of inclusive practices in the Republic of Ireland. They identified the doubts teachers have about the appropriateness of inclusion for children with SEN depended greatly on the severity of their disability or specific education need. The concerns teachers have about time constraints, lack of supports and insufficient resources are highlighted. The lack of sufficient training is underpinned here. Challenges also include teachers having old fashioned and incorrect perceptions of a child's behavior and failing to understand that the behaviour exhibited can often be the only way a child with special needs can communicate their needs.

The special needs assistant perspective

Rose and O'Neill (2009) detail the important role played by teaching assistants (TAs) and special needs assistants (SNAs) in the implementation of inclusive practices in Britain and

Ireland. Both countries have committed to inclusion throughout their respective education systems although the roles of the TA and SNA differ sharply. The TAs have assumed a pedagogical role within their own right, while in Ireland the role of the SNA is predominantly one of caring for a specific child. However, they point out that no definitive model for effective adult support deployment in classrooms has yet to be identified.

O'Neill in Rose (2010), notes that a lack of clarity about the role of adult support in classrooms can be a barrier to inclusion. This confusion about the role and lack of sufficient training has led to negative consequences for the students who are being supported. She stresses that while SNAs have an important role in effective inclusion, they are not intended as substitutes for trained class or special education teachers. However, there is merit in broadening the role of the SNA with increased training. SNAs themselves acknowledge the importance of developing skills to help break down barriers to inclusion and are aware of how new skills enhance and clarify their role.

In their study of the role of TAs in schools, Webster et al (2010) found that a teaching assistant's pedagogical role can sometimes be detrimental to the child with SEN. They argue that the TA's role needs to be refocused. If the pedagogical aspect of it is to be maintained, it needs to be better defined and utilised. They don't rule out TAs reverting to a caring, non-pedagogical role where the school would decide how best to utilise them.

Webster et al (2011) look a bit closer at the pedagogical role TAs play and the controversy that surrounds their deployment. They conclude that while there are definitely issues involved with this role, the TAs are not to blame and it is the system that needs changing.

In their report on the SNA scheme, the Department of Education and Skills (2011) examines closely the role of the SNA in Irish classrooms. They conclude that the role of the SNA has expanded beyond what was intended, and in some cases, there is a pedagogical element to their current role. They express concern at the incorrect or ineffective deployment of SNAs for children who aren't entitled to them or in clerical or secretarial roles. There is an interesting observation made that SNAs, in some cases, are being used to 'contain' behaviour instead of appropriate planning being in place for the child drawn up by teachers and supported by professionals.

The school leadership perspective

An early view on the dilemmas facing principals and management is described in Meegan and MacPhail (2006) when they talk about there being no easy answer to the pressures on schools to include children with special educational needs (SEN). They describe the 'fear' principals and teachers have when facing unfamiliar situations and needs.

Flatman Watson (2009) carried out a more focused examination of the realities facing leaders of schools implementing inclusive practice. Principals of primary schools in counties Dublin and Kildare (245 in total), who were part of the data gathering for the report, identified difficulties getting appropriate and sufficient access to resources. There is a perception that the Department of Education and Skills is dragging its heels. This perceived lack of support is leading to issues regarding enrolment where specific needs of pupils can be met within the schools 'current provision'. Schools are being left with no option but to refuse admission to pupils where resources and supports can't be provided. This has led to a

reduction in opportunities for inclusion. The principals in the study also cite a lack of expertise in their staff compounded by a lack of new training.

Ferguson (2010) notes the challenge facing schools of making inclusive practices available to "everyone, everywhere and all of the time". Citing Law and Wenger (1991) she discusses school leadership facilitating communities of practice or professional learning communities where teachers learn from one another in an ongoing way through working together to teach and improve their practice. She shows the opportunities of inclusion for schools when she describes how increased complexity of schooling has forced teachers out of the classroom to work together to navigate inclusion.

Rose (2010) points out the critical role played by school leadership in ensuring good inclusive practice in the school setting. Citing Dipaula and Walther-Thomas (2003) he establishes how the school leader's credibility is bolstered by operationalising inclusive attitudes with practical actions. The emphasis is very much on the leadership providing support structures for teachers and pupils.

This leadership support role is echoed in Thompson (2012) when he talks about the importance of developing an appreciation and understanding of evidence based inclusive practices that are supported by head teachers, governors and research bodies. He broadens his vision of leadership and inclusion when he describes the importance of inclusion being part of any school leadership agenda to ensure that it is fully embraced by the school. For a school to become more inclusive, head teachers, staff and governing bodies must show enthusiasm for inclusion.

In their paper on teachers' perceptions of inclusion, Shevlin et al (2012) researched a small number (7) but with a wide variety of schools from urban to rural, mixed to single gender and differing socio economic backgrounds. Among some of their findings was an interesting point made by a principal who mentioned that they believed that inclusion must be based on child centrality and that the school's ethos would dictate if the child with SEN feels part of the learning environment. However, a clear issue that is highlighted is the 'guilt' felt by principals. There is much agreement that no matter what is done there is always the feeling that schools are not doing enough for children with SEN.

Methedology

My project is an interpretive study. To gather the data that I needed for this study I decided that the semi-structured interview would give me the qualitative data that I was looking for. Walliman (2005) describes the interview as a flexible tool with a wide range of applications and is suitable for quantitative data but particularly useful when qualitative data is required. It is this usefulness that makes the interview the ideal data-gathering process for me in this case. Bell (2010), citing Selltiz (1962), warns of some issues with the interview when she points out that interviewers are human beings and not machines and their manner may have an effect on the respondents. This was important for me to consider as I knew the respondents so I was conscious of just asking the questions and avoiding influencing their answers in any way.

The school that I did my research in is a mixed primary school. There are approximately 150 children, nine teachers, four SNAs and an administrative principal. I thought carefully about who I would ask to be interviewed so as to get the most useful data. I decided to interview the principal and deputy principal representing the management perspective. I interviewed teachers who had recent experience with two children with significant behavioural issues. I also interviewed the two SNAs assigned to these two children. I conducted each interview after school on consecutive days, in my classroom with the door closed. Each interview lasted approximately seven to eight minutes and, with the permission of each staff member, I recorded each interview with a dictaphone to help my accuracy when analysing their answers. I asked each interviewee the same five questions but asked them to consider their own perspective when answering.

Before I began the interviews I approached the principal and secured permission to conduct this research in the school, subject to anonymity for staff and school insofar as was practical.

Findings and analysis

What is your understanding of inclusion in the primary school context?

Both SNAs have a clear view of what inclusion means to them. They both speak about fully accepting children with SEN in to the school community. SNA A goes further: "It's important that the child with SEN be given the same opportunity to be educated as any other pupil".

These opportunities for inclusion are what Flatman and Watson (2009) spoke about as being at risk with the reduction in resources and Department of Education and Skills failure to provide support. SNA B speaks about the effects of inclusion on the child: "Inclusion lets the child with SEN become more independent which increases their self-esteem".

This focus on the needs of the child is the 'child centrality' described by Shevlin et al (2012). Both teachers understood at a basic level that inclusion was about bringing children of all abilities together in the classroom, Teacher A: "Making sure everyone is cared for and included". Teacher B: "It means to include all children regardless of their specific education needs..." They are acknowledging their role educating children of all abilities as Florian (2008) described. Teacher B makes an interesting point when he adds, "...where possible, in a mainstream class". This 'where possible' comment indicates that he feels that there are instances, as Shevlin et al (2012) illustrates, where he believes that full inclusion isn't always appropriate.

Can every child be educated in a mainstream classroom?

The SNA opinions differ a little on this question. SNA B feels that all children can and should be educated in a mainstream setting: "I feel each child has a right to be educated in a mainstream setting". SNA A, however, wasn't so sure. She felt the question didn't have a simple answer: "It really depends on each case and what specific need they have".

SNA A shows an understanding of what Ferguson (2010) spoke of when he described the increased complexity of education with inclusion. Both SNAs agree that availability of resources is key to effective inclusion. This is in line with Flatman and Watson (2009). SNA

A: "If the needs of the child with SEN aren't being met then how can a mainstream class be the right option?"

The teachers had strong views on this question. They both felt that all children could be educated in a mainstream classroom. However, teacher B felt that a scarcity of sufficient supports and resources meant that some children shouldn't be educated in a mainstream classroom. "Some children with severe special needs would require lots of supports. Without these in place, it mightn't be possible." This statement once more echoes Shevlin et al (2012) in underling the importance of resources. Teacher A spoke about the importance of re-educating teachers: "More and more children are coming to school with autism and other needs and we just don't have the tools to deal with them, teachers need to be re-educated". This understanding of the need for re-educating teachers is central to De Boer's (2011) belief that training is needed to change attitudes. However, it does not run in line with Florian and Linklater's (2010) arguement when they talk about teachers making use of what they already know.

The principal believes that pupils with SEN can be included, but not without the proper resources in place: "It isn't about wishing or wanting them to be included, it's about if the school has the ability and resources to ensure the particular child can engage with the curriculum in some way and integrate with the rest of the school community." This is what Ferguson (2010) notes is the difficulty faced by schools implementing inclusion for everyone, everywhere, all the time. This issue about resources was highlighted in Flatman and Watson's report.

Have your attitudes to inclusion changed over the past two years or due to your experiences with any specific child?

SNA A's attitude has changed. She found the child she was working with so difficult and disruptive initially that she despaired. They worked hard until they found strategies that worked: "His 'choice' cards and visual timetable have changed everything really, they have helped us to manage his behaviour and they allow him to take part in lessons with the rest of the class". Learning new skills has led her to be more comfortable working with the child. However, this professional development is not readily available or encouraged by the Department of Education and Skills (2011). SNA B's attitude doesn't appear to have changed as much: "Once the correct structure is in place, the children can thrive in a warm supportive environment."

It is interesting to see the contrasting views held here. I feel that SNA A is anxious to improve and develop her practice in the model of the TA in the UK and SNA B seems to be content in the caring supporting role envisaged by the Department of Education and Skills (2011). Both SNAs are comfortable in their differing visions of the role of the SNA. The lack of clarity about the role of the SNA in the Irish education system and the lack of CPD means the adult supports aren't being utilised as well as they could be as described by O'Neill cited in Rose (2010). The two teachers felt that their attitudes had changed somewhat. Teacher A, in particular, felt very strongly about it: "I have a child with severe ADHD in my class. I used to look at him last year and worry about how I was going to deal with him. I was convinced

that he shouldn't really be in a mainstream school. Having now taught him I realise that we, as teachers, are the ones that need to change to accommodate all needs".

Her former attitude that the child shouldn't be in a mainstream school is similar to Rogers (2002) talking about teachers choosing the narrative that best suited their situation. In this case she was unsure of her ability to teach the child, therefore, the child shouldn't be in a mainstream school. Her change in attitude, however, goes along with Florian (2008) when she describes how individual teachers can change how they work in their own classrooms.

The deputy principal's attitude hasn't changed. She has worked in the resource room for several years so she is comfortable working with children with SEN. "I wouldn't say my attitude has changed. These children need to be educated like all children do. I just try to set an example of inclusion for the rest of the staff and children to see." Her attitude is a very positive one and it runs along with Rose (2010) citing Dipaula and Walther-Thomas (2003) describing how school leaders' credibility is bolstered by their promotion of inclusive practices through practical actions.

Have you had any particular successes including children with SEN in the school community?

The two SNAs spoke about successes. SNA A spoke in general terms: "Thankfully, when we got the right structures and supports in place the year has worked out very successfully." She had spent the first number of weeks 'containing' the child's behaviour by taking the child out of the class regularly and removing the child from classroom activities that set off disruptive behaviour as per Department of Education and Skills (2011). This brought about very little change or improvement in the child's behaviour and led to the child falling behind in class work. She found that the situation improved immeasurably once the teacher had put the necessary structures and plans in place. SNA B was more specific when describing the successes she had: "I've worked with a child with SEN who loved Lego. I got a group of four of his classmates to play with him. It was very rewarding watching them chatting and laughing and sharing ideas."

SNA B's actions seemed to encapsulate the SNA situation in Ireland. Organising a simple group work activity to foster inclusion within the classroom she was working in, while useful and helpful, is outside the remit of the SNA as it is pedagogical in nature (DES, 2011). The successful outcome would indicate that the SNA role could and should be expanded as Webster (2010) describes for the TA in Britain although not forgetting that as O'Neill, cited in Rose (2010) stated, SNAs are not sufficient substitutes for teachers.

The teachers viewed the successes they had in terms of the children with SEN in their classrooms taking part in day to day lessons. Teacher B explained: "Having pupil A be part of the class is a success in itself. Anytime he takes part in a group activity or completes some maths work is what I would consider a success." Teacher B understands the importance of teachers managing their expectations of what a successful outcome is. He looked at where the child was and the progression he was making. He then planned according to the child's need and not the curriculum. He didn't feel any of the 'guilt' described by Shevlin et al (2012) that the child wasn't completing curricular targets. Teacher C considered her own change in attitude and improved skills as a success for inclusion. She had been so anxious prior to

this year that her ability to adapt to the child's needs had given her an enormous sense of satisfaction as described by Florian and Linklater (2010).

The principal spoke about the successes of enrolling children with behavioural issues in the face of opposition from some staff: "It was a really difficult time getting the staff to come around to accepting these children. They simply didn't accept that it was our job to deal with these children. Thankfully the two teachers managed beautifully and the voices of opposition have died down."

These are the unfamiliar situations and needs that are faced by schools as mentioned by Meegan and MacPhail (2006). They also mention how there are no simple answers and this is very much the case in this situation.

What needs to be done in the future to ensure good inclusive practices in the school?

The SNAs had conflicting views on what the priorities needed to be for the future. SNA A sees training for staff as the way forward: "I think all members of staff should undergo a certain amount of training regarding children with SEN. This would help our understanding of the needs and abilities of these children." This grasp of the need for training is laudable but, however, it goes against the DES (2011) vision for the role of the SNA. This eagerness for CPD is more in line with the role of the TA in Britain where the CPD path is much clearer, as pointed out in Rose and O'Neill (2009).

SNA B's recommendations for the future are more broadly based: "I think that all staff need to be more aware of the needs of all of the children in the school not just the ones in their classroom. They need to be more positive about teaching children with SEN." This is what Thompson (2012) spoke of when he talked about the need for the school to embrace inclusion.

The teachers felt that the number one priority was re-education and up skilling for the school staff. Teacher A suggested the Croke Park hour be used to bring experts in to give talks to the staff relating to the special needs found in the school. Both teachers had concerns about how senior staff in the school would react if courses were imposed upon them. Teacher D expressed concerns that whole school training mightn't suit all members of staff as the subject of inclusiveness for all was still a divisive topic in the school – as it is in many schools. This is contrary to Wenger (1991) describing "communities of practice", with teachers coming together to learn. The resistance of some members could be due to many reasons from strong beliefs about the appropriateness of integrating children with special needs to the "fear of the unfamiliar situation and needs of inclusion" as described by Meegan and MacPhail (2006).

The leadership view was very much in line with the teachers' views on the need for staff to change their practices. The deputy principal made an interesting point: "All staff need to take responsibility for the children with SEN in their class. It is not just up to the resource teacher to teach these children. They need to let go of the idea that they are there to teach the very able. Those days are gone." She is anxious for a 'community of practice' type atmosphere in the school as described in Ferguson (2010) citing Lave and Wenger (1991). She is worried that children with SEN aren't fully welcomed by all staff into the school community as mentioned in Shevlin et al (2012). The principal was concerned with the direction the

school would have to take in the light of the Department of Education and Skill's reduction in SNA provision and resource hours and the effect this would have on enrolment: "It has got to the point that the resources just aren't there to meet the needs of every child out there. We will have to seriously consider refusing admission to children with specific needs if the appropriate resources can't be put in place."

These issues are what Flatman Watson (2009) spoke about where the Department of Education and Skills dragging its heels would lead to reductions in opportunities for inclusion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to look again at some of the challenges, dilemmas and opportunities associated with inclusion that I have discovered in my study of this primary school. I feel that attitudes and practices are changing. The greatest challenge I could see was getting teachers to buy into inclusion. Though hardly a new concept, there is much evidence of the difficulty changing ingrained attitudes amongst staff and this could be a problem in schools where some staff may feel that teaching children with SEN is somebody else's problem.

I examined the dilemma of how best to utilise adult supports in the classroom. There is much in the literature about how SNAs are under used compared to TAs in Britain. The Department of Education and Skills has a very clear idea of the role they envisage for the SNA and that is one of a carer without any of the pedagogical role of the TA. This lack of a developmental path has led to frustration amongst SNAs and this is clear from my interviews where there is an appetite for development as well as some evidence of minor pedagogical work with successful outcomes. The further dilemma of trying to implement inclusive practices in environments where adequate resources and supports are scarce is one that school leadership is grappling with. It has become so difficult that in the case of the principal that I interviewed, she was considering refusing enrolment to future children with SEN on the grounds that the supports just aren't there to meet their needs.

I was able to identify several instances of opportunities that have arisen from this new inclusive environment in schools. From my interviews I discovered the appetite for developing skills and re-education was there. Teachers recognised that they needed to be trained to educate children of all needs. This training could enrich the education experience for all and make teachers into better teachers. Inclusion has also given schools the opportunity to grow together and enhance the school community as they embrace children of all needs in their ethos and practice.

References

De Boer, A.A., Pijl, S.J., and Minnaert, A.E.M.G (2011). Regular primary schoolteachers' attitudes towards inclusive education: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(3): 331-353.

Department of Education and Skills (2011). *The Special Needs Assistant Scheme: A Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistants Scheme 2007/8-2010*. Dublin: DES.

Di Paola, M., and Walther-Thomas, C. (2003). *Principals and Special Education: The Critical Role of School Leaders*. University of Florida: Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education.

Ferguson, D. (2008). International trends in inclusive education: the continuing challenge to teach each one and everyone. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 23(2)109-120.

Flatman Watson, S. (2009). Barriers to inclusive education in Ireland: the case for pupils with a diagnosis of intellectual and/or pervasive developmental disabilities. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37(7) 280-282.

Florian, L. (2008). Special or inclusive education, future trends. *British Journal of Special Education*, 35(4) 202–208.

Florian, L., and Linklater, H. (2010). Preparing teachers for inclusive education: using inclusive pedagogy to enhance teaching and learning for all. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 40(4) 369-386.

Lave, D., and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University Press.

Meegan, S., and MacPhail, A. (2006). Inclusive education: Ireland's education provision for children with special educational needs. *Irish Educational Studies*, 25(1) 53 -62.

Rogers, R. (2002). Through the eyes of the institution: A critical discourse analysis of decision making in two special education meetings. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 33(2) 213-237.

Rose, R. (2010). *Confronting Obstacles to Inclusion, International Responses to Developing Inclusive Education*. London: Routledge.

Rose, R., and O'Neill, A. (2009). Classroom support for inclusion in England and Ireland: an evaluation of contrasting models. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 4(3) 250-261.

Shevlin, M., Winter, E., and Flynn, P. (2012). Developing inclusive practice: teacher perceptions of opportunities and constraints in the Republic of Ireland. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17 (10) 1119-1133.

Thompson, D. (2012). Whole School Development: Inclusion and Special Education Needs. In J. Cornwall and L. Graham (Eds) *Leading on Inclusion Dilemmas, Debates and a new perspective* (p 54). Routledge.

Webster, R., Blatchford, P., Basset, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., and Russell, A. (2010). Double standards and first principles: framing teaching assistant support for pupils with special educational needs. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 25(4) 319-336.

Webster, R., Blatchford, P., Basset, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., and Russell, A. (2011). The wider pedagogical role of teaching assistants. *School Leadership and Management*, 31(1) 3-20

Nationalism, prejudice and intercultural education

ANNE HORAN

Abstract

The demographic pattern of Ireland in the early 21st century is far removed from that of the mid 20th century. Ireland has become a multicultural/multiracial society. Ethnic diversity is now the norm in our towns, cities, and in rural communities.

Nationalism as a concept will be examined. While mentioning Rousseau and political nationalism, I will concentrate on Herder and the concepts of cultural nationalism and cultural pluralism, and their relevance to Ireland in the early 21st century. Nones (2008) and Kellas (1991) refer to a form of nationalism which leads to prejudice and distrust of newcomers. In Ireland today this is demonstrated in attitudes and behaviour shown to the immigrant families who have changed the cultural make-up of Ireland in recent years. The impact of intercultural education in Irish primary schools will be considered.

Keywords: **ethnic diversity, prejudice, distrust, cultural nationalism, intercultural education.**

Introduction

The demographic pattern of Ireland in the early 21st century is far removed from that of the mid 20th century. Ireland has become a multicultural/multiracial society. Ethnic diversity is now the norm in our towns, cities, and in rural communities. There is evidence of a lack of integration of newcomer children and their families into school communities (Devine, 2008). This paper aims to explore some of the background to this lack of integration and, while doing so, will examine initiatives in primary education which aimed to address interculturalism and intercultural education in Ireland. Nationalism as a concept will be examined. While mentioning Rousseau and political nationalism, I will concentrate on Herder and the concepts of cultural nationalism and cultural pluralism. I will argue that these expressions of nationalism are of relevance to Ireland in the 21st century. Guidelines in place since 1995 have not stemmed the tide of discrimination against many immigrant peoples. Will the *Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015* succeed where other guidelines have failed?

Changing educational landscape in Ireland

Ireland has undergone many changes since the middle of the 20th century. Ireland's economic boom, the years of the Celtic Tiger, began in or around 2000 with Ireland seeing a large

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

increase in investment from abroad, the lowest corporate tax rate in the OECD, a young well educated workforce and a level of social partnership and infrastructure investment which was supported by the European Union (Sweeney, 1999). Unemployment levels fell. Indeed Ireland saw an increase in employment, which grew by 77% between 1993 and 2007 (OECD, 2009). Ireland became a member of the Eurozone. The European Union itself saw an expansion in May 2004 and migrant labour became a feature of the EU. Ireland had low levels of personal income tax and an educational system which was highly regarded internationally. Thus, Ireland was now an attractive country in which to live, work and raise a family. The years 2002-2006 saw a large increase in immigration to Ireland. By 2007 the immigrant population was approximately 11% of the total population, an increase of 60% in ten years. It is no surprise that the 2006 census showed 188 nationalities living in Ireland, with the country now having a total immigrant population of 420,000 (CSO, 2006).

A country whose previous demographic patterns were characterised by large scale emigration, from 2004 became a favoured destination for immigrants seeking a better life. Many of these economic migrants came to Ireland with their families, and this brought about the emergence of a new group of children into Irish primary schools, newcomer children. The *OECD Review of Migrant Education* estimated that in 2009 about 10% of students in primary schools had nationalities other than Irish (OECD, 2009).

Educational policy: a response to diversity.

The Irish education system now faced new challenges. There were a large number of newcomer children attending Irish primary schools, with varied levels of linguistic needs and abilities. These children began to attend mainstream schools, being educated alongside children for whom English was their first language. Language and learning needs were quickly identified. Language acquisition became one of the more immediate aspects of intercultural education. The DES has provided support for children who do not have English as their first language by the provision of English language support teaching, and have directed that newcomer children are entitled to this support for two years. This enables the development of conversational English. However, it is acknowledged that the development of academic English requires a five year period of instruction, (Cummins, 2011). The withdrawal of this support at a time when linguistic ability is still developing leaves many children struggling to survive in the classroom.

Policy initiative in the area of aiding language acquisition was supported financially by the Department of Education and Science (DES). Resources were made available to help schools at this time. Guidelines on intercultural education in the primary school issued from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2005). With the aim of advising schools in policy development and planning the guidelines explore approaches and methodologies which are suitable for intercultural education, including *Toolkit for Diversity in the Primary School* (2007), *Up and Away*, IILT (2006). DES circulars 53/07 and 15/09 were issued.

Seen as relevant to all children, not only those newly arrived in Ireland, intercultural education is defined by the NCCA (2005) as follows: "education which respects, celebrates

and recognises the normality of diversity in all areas of human life. It sensitises the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life encircles all of us" (NCCA, 2005, p.3). "It is education which promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination and promotes the value upon which equality is built" (NCCA 2005, p.3).

These principles are relevant to all children in Irish primary schools, and have long been recognised as such. The *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) is regarded as being an intercultural curriculum, and provides aims which support intercultural education. For all children, intercultural education sets out to provide knowledge, understanding, attitudes and values. It is integrated with all subjects and with the general life of the school, and should provide the child with a 'real world' focus. Language is recognised as central to the development of intercultural competencies. The NCCA guidelines document, a response to the changing population in primary schools, embraces the aims of this earlier curriculum and expresses the need to form "a school culture that is welcoming, respectful and sensitive to the needs of all children" (NCCA, 2005, p.6). The aims of the guidelines are stated as follows: "to contribute to the development of Ireland as an intercultural society based on a shared sense that language, culture and ethnic diversity is valuable" (NCCA, 2005, p.5).

The importance of cultural diversity is explored, with reference to the Irish Traveller community as the largest minority ethnic group in Ireland and to the existence of two official languages, English and Irish, (as well as Ulster Scots, Irish Sign Language, and Cant, which is a language used by Travellers). Similar to the 2005 NCCA guidelines, *Guidelines on Traveller Education in Primary Schools* (DES, 2005) states that, "Young people should be enabled to appreciate the richness of a diversity of cultures and.... to recognise and to challenge prejudice and discrimination" (IES, 2010, p.23). Diversity is not new to Irish schools. Religious diversity has historically been a feature of the Irish education system, albeit in a restricted way, with the existence of Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland and other minority faith schools.

While the necessity for English as an additional language support is accepted, DES has been criticised for not providing for critical anti-racist practice/praxis in schools (Kitching, 2010). Could integration and inclusivity have been better fostered if schools had done more to develop awareness of and non-toleration of hostility, prejudice and racist behaviour?

Recent initiative

The latest initiative in the provision of English as an additional language (EAL) and in the development of intercultural education is the *Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015* (2010), a joint publication by the DES and the Office of the Minister for Integration. This strategy emerged following a commitment by the Irish government in 2001 to develop and to implement a National Action Plan against Racism (NPAR). Following consultation with the education partners, sectoral consultation meetings and the consideration of written submissions, including national and international research, the *Intercultural Education Strategy* (IES) was developed at a time when economic circumstances in Ireland were changing. In spite of this economic change a significant part of the population of Ireland is still

composed of migrant workers, which highlights the continuing importance of intercultural education in Irish schools.

Of importance to the success of the IES is the adoption of a whole school approach to the creation of an intercultural learning environment, which would encourage and promote active partnership, engagement and effective communication with the school community. A number of goals for educators have been identified to aid the IES in the creation of an inclusive, intercultural and integrated society. These include building the capacity of teachers/educators to develop an intercultural learning environment, the adoption of a whole school approach to creating this environment, the encouragement of active partnership and effective communication between schools, students, parents and communities.

The implementation of these goals for intercultural education is designed to build on the work already done in Irish schools, but it is "about thinking, planning and doing things differently, conscious of diversity and the need to create intercultural learning environments" (p.52). The IES is seeking a "concerted and evolving change of attitudes" (p.57).

Has intercultural education in Ireland been successful?

Issues of prejudice, racism and bullying have been identified as being both challenges and barriers to inclusion in our schools. In the study *Addressing the Challenges and Barriers to Inclusion in Irish Primary Schools* (2010), researchers in St Patrick's College found that, although present, these factors did not appear as major challenges to inclusion. "These barriers, according to the teachers... were more prevalent at post primary level and incidences of prejudice/racism were mostly reported in relation to minority groups".

These findings were not replicated by Devine et al (2008) who noted the "consistently hidden aspect of racial conflict in schools". Most obvious in the forms of name calling and fighting, reference is made to 'latent racism' where it is acknowledged that teachers may not be fully aware of occurrences of racism/racist behaviour in the classroom or schoolyard. Research by ICIS (1996), Myers (2003), Rutter (2003) and Tomlinson (2005) have shown evidence of hostility and racism towards newcomer children, which are often hidden under a layer of general acceptance.

Hospitality and hostility

I look to philosophy to explain the origins of the above mentioned hostility. Fear or suspicion of the unknown person, the 'stranger', the 'other' has long been present in societies around the world. History shows an attitude of prejudice or discrimination towards newcomers, and this is demonstrated today in attitudes and behaviour shown to the immigrant families who have changed the cultural make up of Ireland in recent years.

The challenge of choice between hospitality and hostility is both ancient and ever present, having roots in Greek Indo-European tradition as in the Abrahamic tradition (Kearney, 2011). Pohl (2006) speaks of the ancient tradition of hospitality. Christianity long had a tradition of offering hospitality to strangers, to acknowledging the needs of others. *The Bible*, in Matt: 5:43-48, speaks of the importance of the value of every human being, and asks "if you speak

only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary?" Further, in Matthew 25: 31-46, Jesus speaks of welcome and exclusion, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me". This theme of universalising the notion of neighbour, combined with the notion of recognising the image of God in all people is seen as a foundation for recognition, respect and care, (Pohl, 2006). The *Old Testament* exhorts the Israelites to understand the plight of others when, as is expressed in Exodus 23:9, "You shall not oppress a resident alien, you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt". This biblical exhortation speaks loudly to this author when thinking of newcomer peoples in Ireland. One would expect that Ireland, as a country long oppressed by foreign rule would be empathetic with the experiences of immigrants, would recognise the commonality of all peoples, and extend a welcome. Whether this has been the reality remains to be seen.

Nationalism in Ireland in the 20th century

Revolution in Ireland, the 1916 Easter Rising and the Irish Civil War in the 1920s brought much change. A new people emerged, an independent Irish people. The concept of 'being Irish' emerged. Irishness became synonymous with not being British, and was constructed through identifiers of religion, nation, diaspora, gender and class (Kitching, 2010).

Becoming a new nation in the early 20th century, and following hundreds of years of oppression and colonisation, it became necessary to define the new nation in the 1937 Constitution, which placed emphasis on Gaelic Romanticism, on Roman Catholicism and western liberalism. The family unit was idealised, as was the agricultural way of life. From that time Irishness was seen as sovereign, Gaelic and Catholic (Lee, 1989). Ireland in the 1950s, 1960s and again in the 1980s experienced emigration. Recession at home forced many to travel to England, America and later to Canada and Australia, for work. Many made new lives for themselves in these countries.

At home in Ireland the notion of what made one Irish was unchanged. Indeed it was not until the 2004 citizenship referendum that having at least one Irish citizen as a parent entitled one to Irish citizenship. Prior to this one had to be born on Irish soil. As already described, Ireland in the closing years of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century underwent dramatic demographic change. Many of the economic migrants who came to Ireland at that time experienced exploitation. Qualifications attained in these workers' home countries were often unrecognised, and there is evidence of employees working long hours for minimal wages (Hyland, 2010).

Having considered the short history of nationalism in Ireland, an emerging nation in the 20th century, the question may be posed whether the popular vision of the Irish as welcoming is an accurate one? Has the Irish nation developed sufficiently to offer a welcome to strangers?

Herder and the notion of cultural nationalism

Herder, acknowledged as the first multiculturalist, ascertained that each person has an

original way of being human. The notion emerged in the late 18th century that all persons have a voice which has something unique to say. Herder applied this concept to the individual, to language and to culture-bearing peoples. Seen as the founder of cultural nationalism, Herder is accepted as having "virtually invented the idea of belonging" (Berlin, cited in Gardels, 2009, p.30). He identified the need of a people to belong to a group, and "to feel at home somewhere, with your own kind". Using terms such as 'Volksgeist', the spirit of the people, (often associated with certain types of nationalism), nationalsprache, national language, and nationalgeschichte, national traditions, Herder explored the idea that all nations are of equal order in rank, and have the right to develop according to their national spirit. Condemning the exaltation of one's nation at the expense of others, Herder discusses the diversity of nations (Llobera, 1996). Not seeing diversity as a result of race, he is of the opinion that cultures developed as a result of a number of factors: geography, heredity, education and tradition. Berlin explores Herder's theory of each group or nation having its own Volksgeist, and explains this as a "a set of customs and a lifestyle, a way of perceiving and behaving that is of value solely because it is their own". The culture of a nation is derived from traditions that come from "collective historical experience shared only by members of the group", (Berlin, cited in Gardels, 2009, p.30). A person's culture determines his/her identity and as explored by White (2005), a sense of community and collective belonging is the basis of a sense of nationalism. When speaking of tradition the importance of language in Herder's conception of cultural nationalism becomes apparent.

The word 'Volk' meaning 'nation of people' is closely linked to the language of the people. The religious beliefs, customs, traditions and history of the nation are transmitted through the language of a people. Having a common language allows all sectors of the nation to grow and develop a common sentiment. The importance of language is further seen when Herder described it as a nation's "collective treasure, the source of its social wisdom and communal self-respect" (Herder, cited in Spicer, 2000).

Herder's ideas of cultural nationalism are applicable to all nations. Each nation could have its own Volksgeist, existing in a world which contains many nations. He saw the value of the many different cultures in the world, and argues that each nation is the result of a particular culture and way of life, with common traditions and a collective memory grounded in a particular language (White, 2005). Herder disagrees with nationalists who impose their values and ways of life on other peoples, being of the opinion that such imposition violates the organic unity of the original culture. Herder, (cited in White, 2005, p.173) explored cultural diversity as desirable, stating that "each people has its own specific genius and provides a uniquely valuable expression of humanitat". Acknowledging that different cultures have different customs and values, he argues that no culture is superior to others. White expresses the view that all cultures can learn something about goodness from others. Herder believed in cultural pluralism, as did other philosophers such as Herzen and Vico. They believed that cultures were incommensurable and, as expressed by Berlin, "for them... the plurality of cultures is irreducible", (Gardels, 2009, p.33). It is this aspect of Herder's views of nationalism, that all nations could peacefully co-exist, that make his work relevant to multiculturalists in the early 21st century.

Herder and cultural pluralism

When considering the concept of cultural pluralism I found the article by Spicer (2000) 'Herder on Cultural Pluralism and the State: An Examination of His views and Their Implications for Public Administration' very illuminating. Spicer provides many quotations from Herder which clarify for me the ideas I have been exploring.

As I have already stated Herder saw the culture of a nation, the Volk, with its language and traditions as being central to how people regarded themselves and their place among other nations. "The happiness of man... (is)... the child of practice, tradition and custom", (Herder, 1969, in Spicer, 2000 p.307). He considered that a people's culture and language were inseparable. Language was "the medium by which our minds and tongues were first moulded and by which images were transplanted from the hearts of our parents into our own" (Herder, in Barnard, p.164). Again Herder says that each nation "cherishes in and through its language the history, the poetry and songs about the great deeds of its forefathers" (p.169). Herder spoke about the many nations in the world, each with its own language, culture and tradition. I have already mentioned Herder's view that all nations are of equal importance. He considered that individual nations had different views regarding happiness and virtue, believing that "not a man, not a country, not a national history, not a state is like another" (in Spicer, 2000, p.312). Being aware of the value of individual nations' cultures, Herder observed that this diversity in ntional cultures meant that men and women living within any particular culture were often blind to many of the sources of happiness and virtues in other countries (in Spicer, 2000, p.312) and he further saw that this dismissal of the values of other cultures could turn into "contempt and disgust... (and could lead to)... prejudices, mob judgement and narrow nationalism" (Herder, cited in Spicer, 2000, p.312). Is this what has happened in Ireland? Cultural diversity in Ireland demands changes in attitude and in education.

Intercultural Guidelines in Ireland (NCCA, 2005) make use of the term interculturalism to describe the approach in Ireland to cultural diversity. This term "expresses a belief that we all become personally enriched by coming in contact with and experiencing other cultures, and that people of other cultures can and should be able to engage with each other and learn from each other" (NCCA, 2005, p.3). The guidelines serve to acknowledge Taylor's (1994) assertion that it is necessary to give recognition to all cultures as recognition forges identity. The hypothesis that all cultures are on the same footing and have something to share with other cultures is seen by Taylor as the beginning of a valuable multicultural curriculum. Speaking of the "normality of diversity in all areas of human life" the guidelines refer to the idea that "humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldview, and that this breadth of human life enriches us all" (NCCA, 2005, p.3). This echoes the notion espoused by Taylor (1994) and Herder (cited in Berlin, 1997), that nations are of equal value or worth, and have something to offer. In the educational arena many institutions, schools and colleges are criticised for not recognising or respecting the cultural identities of citizens. Gutmann (1994) expresses the opinion that significant controversy exists in society today over whether and how the identities of cultural and disadvantaged minorities are recognised. The identity of a person is based on ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and the question could be asked if people are treated as equals in politics?

In education? In schools, colleges and universities? A person's basic needs such as food and shelter may be fulfilled, but is cultural context necessary to give worth to identity? As unique individuals, part of this uniqueness is formed by the manner in which a person integrates, reflects upon and modifies his or her own cultural heritage and that of other people in society.

Herder's view of cultural nationalism, as discussed earlier, was misappropriated, and its theories developed into the Nazi Regime in Germany, Herder's homeland. Herder himself said that one nation should not "oppress or murder, or rob ... (the) ... American (native American)... (or the)... Negro... (because)... they are men like thee" (p.284).

Herder believed that each culture had its own values, and that these values could not always be assimilated into those of other cultures. He saw no way to compare or rank the cultures of nations, and in saying this observed that each society has within itself the "ideal of its own perfection, wholly independent of all comparison with others" (Herder, in Berlin 1997 p.428).

In describing Herder as an avatar of modern multiculturalism, Spicer (2000) points to Herder's argument that while nations strive to develop their own characteristics, it is this striving that is a basis of humanity and of diversity. Further stating his views on the values of different nations and on their co-existence he says "no other person has the right to constrain me to feel as he does, not the power to impart to me his mode of perception. No other person can, in short, transform my existence and identity into his," (Herder, 1969, p.308 as cited in Spicer, 2000).

Linker (2000) argues that while Herder was the originator of the debate on pluralism he was more ambivalent towards the topic than Berlin espouses. Even though Herder shows "signs of contempt for people who live entirely within the closed horizon of a particular centre, 'as if their anthill were the universe" (Linker, 2000, p.3), Linker suggests that in Herder's work, pluralists will not discover a writer who will affirm the value of pluralism, but rather that in the work of pluralists will find "someone ready and willing to take them on a quest to transcend it" (Linker, 2000, p.12). In the late 20th century and early 21st century, capitalism has shaped the political sovereignty of nations. The world sees emerging multicultural/multiracial societies which have resulted from migration and growing economies globally. White (2005) acknowledges that the world of the 21st century is very different to that of Herder's 18th century, but he continues by asking to what extent we should encourage the preservation of specific cultural differences among newcomer populations in a country.

Kellas (1991), speaks of a nation as a people who consider themselves bound by history, culture and ancestry. Characteristics of a nation include territory, language, culture and awareness of and feelings of belonging to a nation. Nationalism is seen as both an ideology and as the behaviour of a people. The national self-consciousness of a people leads to actions which define a nation, culturally and politically. Kellas discusses nationalist behaviour which "is based on the feeling of belonging to a community which is the nation" (Kellas, 1991, p.4). Those who do not belong to the nation are seen as "different, foreigners or aliens, with loyalties to their own nations" (Kellas, 1991, p.4). He differentiates between nationalist behaviour which leads to unrest and war and may result in one fighting and perhaps dying

for one's nation, and national behaviour which presents in "prejudice towards foreigners, stereotyping of other nations and solidarity with co-nationals". (Kellas, 1991, p.4).

Nones (2008, p.57), speaks of patriotism as the "sentiment of loyalty and attachment to a country", and he discusses the relationship between this sentiment and the increasing cultural diversity in western countries, which is largely caused by immigration. Exploring various meanings of the concepts of 'we' and 'others', Nones makes a distinction which is as prevalent in Ireland today, when many immigrants are commonly referred to as 'foreigners'. Nones (2008) and Kellas (1991) refer to a form of nationalism which leads to prejudice and distrust of newcomers. In Ireland today this form of nationalism is demonstrated in attitudes and behaviour shown to the immigrant families who have changed the cultural make up of Ireland in recent years. This suspicion is noted by Bryan (2008) when discussing intercultural and anti-racist documents and materials. The era of the Celtic tiger did not benefit all in our society, and many were left behind in a time of perceived material gain. Improved and more flexible labour market conditions meant that many were left behind in the search for higher paid jobs. Now that the time of economic boom is over, and many of the middle class are feeling the effects of the property market collapse, soaring costs of living and an insecure job market, there is an anxiety that their offspring will not experience the same privilege as they themselves have experienced and this anxiety, in a misguided form of nationalism (a consciousness of national boundaries), is projected onto immigrant workers and asylum seekers who are seen as having access to national resources which are now diminishing. There is a perception that immigrant workers and their families are not entitled to social welfare payments, housing and indeed jobs at a time when Irish workers are experiencing changed economic conditions. Garner (cited in Bryan, 2008) has expressed the view that increased expressions of racism are in part a "corollary of the mismatch of expectations and reality in a period of intense economic and social change".

Conclusion

It is worth reflecting on why NCCA guidelines and intercultural documents produced by other interested bodies have not been successful in halting the steady progression of racism in schools and in society. Although the NCCA *Guidelines on Intercultural education in Primary Schools* were published in 2005, teachers received no training in this area, and no resources other than the guidelines themselves were provided for schools. There has been no follow up research into or monitoring of the implementation of the guidelines. Schools at all levels, including primary schools, need to enable pupils to recognise that racism is linked to respect for and tolerance of children and adults from other cultures. The importance of intercultural education for all students, whether native Irish or newcomer, is stressed as the way forward to facilitate the newcomer child.

Early evidence of the origins of the distrust experienced by immigrant families in Ireland today can be traced to the 17th or 18th century when Herder developed his ideas on cultural nationalism. Believing that each nation has its own Volk, Herder believed that the Volk or culture of a nation could not be assimilated into that of another peoples', but that nations/cultures could exist alongside each other. Unfortunately, the value individual nations place

on their own Volk/Volksgeist meant that the culture of other nations was often dismissed, and, as already quoted, Herder saw that this dismissal of the values of other cultures could turn into "contempt and disgust... (and could lead to)... prejudices, mob judgement and narrow nationalism" (Spicer, 2000). These are the origins of the prejudices that are experienced by many of the families who have come to live in Ireland in recent years.

This article considered the development of nationalism in Ireland in the 20th century, giving rise to questions such as, did the creation of the Irish nation and the development of the 1937 Constitution occur too rapidly? Were the Irish traits we embrace and promote abroad (traditional music and dance, literature, the 'craic' and Guinness) embedded in the Irish people themselves, or were at least some of these traits forged by the creators of the new nation? Did immigration at the pace recently experienced occur too rapidly for a nation which had only recently emerged from British rule?

What can now be done to change the reception given to these people who have come to live in our countries for a number of years, or who intend to make Ireland their permanent home?

Nones (2008) and Kellas (1991) when discussing the existence of cultural pluralities consider that it is possible to create a completely new understanding, in the sense of being not 'regressive and violent', but 'progressive and emancipatory,' (Nones, 2008, p.58), where the host nation has to acknowledge that the status quo has changed, that Ireland indeed has entered a new era, that a 'realignment is needed between past conceptualisations and present realities' (Nones, 2008, p.61).

These sentiments are apparent also in the IES strategy, which is seeking a "concerted and evolving change of attitudes". (DES, 2010, p.57). I conclude by referring to the IES document which states the following: "Integration is the responsibility of everyone, based on inclusion and respect for differences: all of society (both host and migrant) has a role to play in promoting an intercultural ethos, integration, inclusion and diversity. Likewise, all educators regardless of whether or not they work with migrant students have a responsibility to develop an intercultural learning environment. Parents and communities have a role to play in the process. The role extends to rejecting racism, bias, stereotyping and discrimination. This approach is not solely the remit of the education sector: it is the responsibility of Irish society." (DES, 2010, p.67)

The IES document, in seeking this "concerted and evolving change of attitudes" (DES, 2010, p.57) is aimed at a number of sections of the population; schools, educators working with migrant students and those not working with migrant students, parents and communities of the host nation and of the migrant nations.

There is a need for a conscious effort to be made to include newcomer families in the life of the school community. Can teachers be re-educated by means of inservice in areas such as discrimination and racist behaviour? Can attitudes to immigrant peoples be changed? Can schools make a difference if prejudice exists in the home? Will the *Intercultural Education Strategy* be successful where the 1995 guidelines on intercultural education have obviously fallen short of achieving their aims? Are the roots of prejudice and distrust too deeply ingrained in Ireland as a nation for the development of an intercultural learning environment, and a multicultural society? These are questions which can only be answered

in time, but schools, especially primary schools, must do all possible in the provision of an intercultural learning environment, in the "provision of an education for all children, both indigenous and immigrant, that values difference and educates all children to embrace the diversity that arises from increasing human mobility and broader processes of globalisation" (Devine, 2009, p.535).

Bibliography

Barnard, F.M. (Ed.) (2009). *J.G. Herder on social and political culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Berlin, I. (2000). *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. Princeton University Press.

Bryan, A. (2008). The Co-articulation of National Identity and Interculturalism in the Irish Curriculum: Educating for Democratic Citizenship? *London Review of Education*, 47-58.

Central Statistics Office (2006). *Census 2006: Preliminary Report*. Dublin: Stationery Office

Cummins, J. (2011). Diverse Futures: Immigration, Education, and Identity in Changing Times. In P. Ó Duibhir, R. McDaid and A. O'Shea (Eds) *All Changed? Culture and identity in contemporary Ireland* (pp 49-70). Dublin: Duras

Department of Education, and the Office of the Minister for Integration (2010). *Intercultural Education Strategy, 2010-2015*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science. (1999). Primary School Curriculum. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science. (2002). *Guidelines on Traveller Education in Primary Schools*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (2007). Circular 53/07. Dublin: Author.

Department of Education and Science (2009). Circular15/09. Dublin: Author.

Devine, D., Kenny, M., and Macneela, E. (2008). Naming the 'other': Children's Construction and Experience of Racisms in Irish Primary Schools. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 369-385.

Devine, D. (2009). Mobilising capitals? Migrant children's negotiation of their everyday lives in school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30(5) 521-535

Garner, S. (2004). Racism in the Irish Experience. In A. Bryan, (2008) The Co-articulation of National Identity and Interculturalism in the Irish Curriculum: Educating for Democratic Citizenship? *London Review of Education*, (6)1 47-58.

Gardels, N. (2009). Return of the Volksgeist. *New Perspect Q24 no4*, 29-39.

Gutmann, A. (ed) (1994). *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition*. Princeton University Press.

Herder, J.G. (1969). J.G. Herder on social and political culture. In F.M. Barnard (Ed.) *J.G. Herder on social and political cuture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press in Spicer, (2000).

Hyland, M. (2010). *Migrant Workers and Access to the Statutory Dispute Resolution Agencies*. Dublin: Labour Relations Commission.

ICIS (1996). *Routes of Racism: The Social Basis of Racist Action*. in Devine et al 2008.

IILT (2006). *Up and Away: A Resource Book for English Language Support in the Primary Schoo*l. Dublin: IILT.

IILT (2007). *Together for Inclusion: Toolkit for Diversity in the Primary School*. Dublin: IILT and SELB.

INTO (1998). *The Challenge of Diversity*. Dublin: INTO.

INTO (2002). *Intercultural Guidelines*. Dublin: INTO.

INTO (2006). *Newcomer Children in the Primary School*. Dublin: INTO.

Kearner, R. (2011). Welcoming the Stranger. In P. Ó Duibhir, R. McDaid and A. O'Shea (Eds) *All Changed? Culture and identity in contemporary Ireland* (pp 168-178). Dublin: Duras.

Kellas, J.G. (1991). *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Kitching, K. (2010). An excavation of the racialised politics of viability underpinning education policy in Ireland. *Irish Educational Studies*, 29(3) 213-229.

Lee, J.J. (1989). *Ireland, 1912-1985: Politics and Society*, Cambridge.

Linker, D. (2000). The Reluctant Pluralism of J.G. Herder. *Review of Politics* 62(2) 267-285.

Llobera, J.R. (1996). Political and Cultural Nationalism. In J.R. Llobera, *The God of Modernity. The Development of Nationalism in Western Education* (p. 154). Oxford: Berg.

Myers, K. (n.d.). Critical voices: Refugees, Exclusion and Schooling. in Devine et al 2008.

NCCA (2005). *Guidelines on Intercultural Education in the Primary School*. Dublin: NCCA.

NCCA (2005). *Guidelines on Intercultural Education in the Primary School*. Dublin: NCCA.

Nones, A. (2008). Toward a Conception of Welcoming and Cooperating Patriotisms. *Perspectives 01*, 16 (1), 57-83.

OECD (2009). *OECD reviews of Migrant Education*. OECD.

Rutter, J. (2003). *Supporting Refugee Children in 21st Century Britain*. in Devine et al 2008.

Spicer, M.W. (2000). Herder on Cultural Pluralism and the State: an Examination of his Views and their Implications for Public Administration. *Administrative theory and praxis* 22 (2) 309-325.

Sweeney, P. (1999). *The Celtic Tiger: Ireland's Continuing Economic Miracle*. UK: Oak Tree Press.

Taylor, C. (1994). The Politics of Recognition. In C. Taylor, *Multiculturalism* (pp. 25-75). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tomlinson, S. Race, Ethnicity and Education under New Labour. Oxford Review of Education, in Devine et al 2008.

Travers, J. et al (2010). *Addressing the Challenges and Barriers to Inclusion in Irish Schools*. Dublin: St Patrick's College.

White, R. (2005). Herder: On the Hospitality and Hostility Ethics of Nationalism. *Humanitas*, 18, 166-181.

Becoming a primary school principal in Ireland: deputy principalship as preparation

DEREK GRANT

Abstract

This study explores both the principal's and deputy principal's roles in management and leadership to discover how better to prepare the latter to progress to principalship. The research used semi-structured interviews with 12 primary deputy-principals exploring their construction of deputyship and principalship from their professional socialisation experiences. Findings revealed the complex relationship which exists between both roles and the extent to which the pervading school culture determines how much meaningful leadership opportunity is distributed beyond the principal. A major outcome of the study is a constructed knowledge of the nature and culture of Irish primary deputyship. Three new typologies of deputy principalship provide a new perspective on the deputyship role, concluding that the gap in experiences and knowledge between deputyship and principalship is so great that energy should flow into the formation of a formal, planned and structured preparation for a deputyship transition into principalship.

Keywords: **principal, deputy principal, distributed leadership, role, preparation**

Introduction

It is a generally accepted belief that quality school leadership is of pivotal importance in determining school success. This point of view is commonly held by the research community and increasingly acknowledged in the 21st century (Bush, 2011). House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman and Gupta (2004, p.15) define leadership as "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organisations of which they are members". Hallinger and Snidvongs (2005) refer to research conducted over the past 20 years which indicates that school level leadership makes a difference in the school climate and in the outcomes of schooling. In order to develop a clearer understanding of how to create and sustain quality leadership, the general tendency has been to focus through the single lens of the principalship to the detriment of the deputy principalship. "Whilst shelves groan under the weight of books and papers concerned with headship in primary schools, there are few which address the issues which are of direct concern to deputy heads" (Day, Hall, Gammage and Coles, 1993, p.ix).

Fortunately, the volume of research into the role of deputyship is increasing, thanks to researchers such as Ashley Oleszewski, Alan Shoho and Bruce Barnett (2012) of the University of Texas at San Antonio. However, it must be acknowledged that it is still an under presented

Email: author@into.ie

ISSN: 2009-6860 (Print) 2009-6879 (Online)
© 2014 Irish National Teachers' Organisation
www.into.ie

role in the professional literature in comparison to principalship. Thus, the deliberate focus of this research is on the primary deputy principalship and its impact upon quality school leadership. The central issue focuses upon how deputy principals can feel better equipped for a possible transition to principalship. The deputy principalship is an important area of inquiry and deserves attention (Tripkin, 2006; Weller and Weller, 2002). This research hopes to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the deputyship role from an Irish perspective with particular relevance to the primary sector. It will explore the challenges, shortfalls and successes of the deputyship as they provide meaningful support to their principal, and how these dimensions contribute to preparation for principalship. In order to focus on the preparedness and willingness of deputy principals for a transition to principalship, there needs to be an exploration of their current role. This research will assess their current experiences as an effective training and stepping stone to principalship.

The traditional narrow focus of leadership scholarship on the principal

A substantial body of literature is concerned with the role of the principal, and consequently evidence concerning school leadership has come mainly from the perspective of the principalship (Muijs and Harris, 2003). To date by far the largest majority of educational leadership studies have been about the practices of principals or heads (Day and Leithwood, 2007; McEwan, 2003; Reeves, 2006). This traditional view of school leadership, focusing solely on the principal, has come in for much criticism, and research now claims that successful leadership involves a distribution of the leadership role leading to a more team orientated approach.

While a considerable body of research exists about school leadership, very little is from the Irish context (Crowley, 2006) and this is at a time "when governments and foundations round the world are developing unparalleled resources to the development of aspiring leaders, as well as those already in the role" (Day and Leithwood, 2007, p.1). There is limited research in the Irish context on educational leadership, particularly studies on the school principalship (Ummanel, 2012) and deputy principalship. Due to the sparse amount of academic research on school leadership undertaken in the Irish Republic, it has been necessary to focus on literature from other western and non-western countries.

The move towards distributed forms of leadership

The role of the deputy principal needs to be set in the context of the 21st century popularity of distributed leadership. However, for the purpose of this study, the value of distributed leadership is not being investigated, instead it is simply a lens from which to examine and better understand the deputyship. Distributed leadership attracts a range of meanings and is associated with a variety of practices. Numerous educational theorists provide differing notions about what exactly is meant by this form of leadership hence a number of different usages of the term have emerged (Mayrowetz, 2008). A considerable amount of literature has been devoted to the concept with regard to theory and practice of educational literature. For many educational researchers, such as Leithwood and Riehl (2003) and Gronn (2003),

distributed leadership is the theory of choice which plays a significant role in modelling what contemporary school leadership should look like. It is their preferred public model for school leadership by developing a sense of responsibility in others apart from the principal. It develops a strong culture of staff collaboration and cohesion.

Evidence from the leadership and school improvement fields suggests that distributed forms of leadership have both the power and potential to transform schools for the better (Harris and Townsend, 2007) by removing the burden for improvement upon the principal as the single strong instructional leader in the school system. Distributed leadership has achieved popularity as the engagement of a wider group of staff is more effective in implementing change, and in a more complex world, the skills and experience of more people are necessary to promote successful leadership (Hatcher, 2005).

Distributed leadership is a popular strategy for reducing principal workload (Spillane, 2006). A number of studies have highlighted the need for leadership to be distributed throughout organisations and the possible advantages in terms of school improvement and better pupil learning outcomes (Mulford, 2008; OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development], 2008; LDS [Leadership Development for Schools], 2007). Significantly, the enthusiasm for distributed leadership within education is not wholeheartedly endorsed by the research community. There is also the belief that the concept has been used to create a mirage, an apolitical workplace where the theory is no longer the new kid on the block but almost the only child in sight (Lumby, 2013).

The difficulty in capturing the essence of deputyship

Educational literature in the past dealing with the role of the deputy principal was very sparse and lacking in rigour (Chi-Kin Lee, Kwan and Walker, 2009), but this is changing. This senior school leadership role is still not clearly defined (Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Armstrong, 2005), being described as the invisible role and the neglected role (Glanz, 2004), and with no great attempt made to 'unpack' the deputy principalship, leaving an "ambiguous and unrecognised role with poorly defined tasks" (Shoho, Barnett and Tooms, 2012, p.3).

The deputy principalship has evolved in response to the recognised need to distribute leadership more widely to achieve improved learning outcomes for pupils (Harris, 2002). It is generally agreed that the deputy principalship role is vital for school success (Marshall and Hooley, 2006; Armstrong, 2005), and through distributed leadership there is a paradigm shift in the way that leadership and management in a school are organised, away from hierarchy to a horizontal collegiate structure where the deputy can exercise leadership: "It's not just possible any longer to 'figure it out' from the top, and have everyone else following the orders of the grand 'strategist'" (Senge in *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership*, 2000, p.14). This is why Hartley (in Bush, 2011, p.88) "argues that its popularity may be pragmatic: to ease the burden of overworked headteachers". There needs to be a fully collaborative culture which draws upon the full range of professional skills and expertise to be found among the members of the organisation (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996).

The deputyship has not come under the same close scrutiny as the principalship or class teacher role, and this has not helped to establish an explanatory theory which would lead to

a better understanding of the role of the deputy principal. There is a general lack of a sound conceptual understanding of what is meant by a deputy principal. Deputy principals as a group have not been subject to the same substantial number of formal research studies (Sutter, 1996), and even with what research has been undertaken there is still the need to carry out additional research in the areas of training, professional development, and the transition to principalship (Oleszewski, Shoho and Barnett, 2012). According to Cranston, Tromans and Reugebrink (2004), research in this area is relatively sparse and identifies only a partial representation of the role. Marshall and Hooley (2006) explain that this does nothing to capture the essence of it. In fact, there is no universal role definition for a deputy principal (Weller and Weller, 2002). Only recently has the literature made any attempt to illustrate the nature of the deputyship (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). The role of deputy principal was created due to expanding bureaucracy and the speed at which the role of the principal was becoming impossible for one person to handle (Scoggins and Bishop, 1993) first appearing early in the 20th century (Tripkin, 2006). Mertz (2006) explains that the role emerged in response to unprecedented growth in student numbers in schools and simultaneous increases in principals' responsibilities.

Deputies are second in command to the principal yet receive scant attention in the research literature by policy makers and academic researchers. Astounding, as all but the smallest schools have a deputy principal, yet how they contribute to school effectiveness is little understood (Harvey and Sheridan, 1995). Some larger schools may have more than one deputy-principal. The position has different labels in different countries, called the deputy principal in Ireland and Australia, the deputy head in the United Kingdom, the vice principal in Canada and the assistant principal in the USA. Regardless of the particular label, deputy principals are one hierarchical level below the school principal in schools.

One of the most simplistic and humorous opinions on the duties of the deputy principal from Dallas, Texas, is that they fill their days with three Bs – "Books, Behinds and Buses" (Good, 2008, p.46). This is not all that different from the early literature, where the role of the deputy principalship was associated primarily with student discipline and attendance, and was perceived as having little influence on the overall leadership of schools (Smith, 1987; Greenfield, 1985). This earlier literature from America was limited as it gave no acknowledgement of the professional support that a deputy could give their principal. The duties centred round student supervision and discipline. There was not a highly defined job description with the deputy often being given tasks that they weren't trained to do. The literature from this time showed how the principal dictated duties, responsibilities and experiences of the deputy principal. This early literature failed to recognise that principals were not helping in preparing deputies for other positions (Greenfield, 1985) and this may be a reason why a significant number of deputy principals were remaining longer in their positions (Gross, Shapiro and Meehan, 1980). More recent research conducted in Queensland, Australia, found that deputy principals are expected to engage in a variety of potentially complex and challenging management and leadership activities, also explaining that the available literature identifies only a partial representation of the role (Cranston et al., 2004). This identified role is described in terms of traditional and restricted sets of administrative, managerial and custodial responsibilities, and little has been done to advance an alternative,

future-focused, strategic and collaborative leadership view of the role needed to meet the increasing complexity of schools (Beare, 2001 in Cranston, Tromans and Reugebrink, 2004, p.228; Caldwell and Spinks, 1998).

The deputyship in Ireland

The position of vice principal was first established in Ireland in 1920 because so few promotional opportunities were available to teachers. Most of the narrow literature in Ireland dealing with the deputyship comes from the IPPN, who explain that the role of the deputy principal has often been defined as 'underdeveloped', 'unclear', and 'confused' (IPPN, 2007, p.4). Circular 16/73, a policy statement issued by the Department of Education in Ireland, rather cautiously identified three aspects of the role of deputy principal: "assisting the principal in the day-to-day organisation and supervision of the school, teaching duties and assignment of specific duties by the principal" but still identified the control by the principal as determining the deputy's role. Since this description was provided over 30 years ago there has been no real policy or strategic development that responds to the leadership and management role of the deputy principal. Reference is made to the vice principal in the *Rules for National Schools* (Department for Education (1965) Rules 75, 76, 123). Rule 123 requires that: "The principal (or in his absence, the vice principal…) must carefully carry out the instructions in the Roll Book, Report Book and Register as to the keeping and care of school records".

In Ireland, all registered teachers with the Irish Teaching Council (ITC) are eligible to be appointed as deputy principals within either the primary or secondary school system, depending on their teaching qualification. There is currently no mandatory preparation or training as a part of the professional socialisation for the position, and the general requirement is successful prior work experience as a teacher. Irish primary deputy principals are paid a promoted post allowance along with their teaching salary for assuming the role of deputy principal. This allowance is linked to the number of authorised teaching posts in the school.

Research by Terry Allen in the Irish Republic (2003), entitled *Two 'Heads' are Better than One: An Examination and Analysis of the Role of the Deputy Principal in Irish Primary Schools*, focused on the position of deputy principals in Irish primary schools. It encompassed an inquiry into the perceived role, workloads, relationship and leadership dimension of the role of deputy principal. It examined and analysed the role of deputy principals in supporting and developing professional learning communities in schools. The findings identified a clear leadership role for the deputy principal in cooperation and partnership with the principal. The particular value of Allen's research is that it draws on the experience and opinions of both principals and deputy principals, thereby offering two valuable perspectives on the functioning and the effectiveness of the deputyship role in Irish primary schools. A successful reconceptualisation and transformation of the deputyship such as that described in Allen's study may lead to greater job satisfaction and a broadening of professional horizons amongst practitioners, thus creating greater career motivation for a future principalship position having already experienced openness of the boundaries of leadership.

The deputy principalship in Irish schools has the potential to be a very important role, yet there is still not enough reference in policy or research to the role of deputy principal (Fullan, 2006 in Máirtín (ed.), 2007). The deputy principalship offers huge potential in alleviating some of the demands of principalship brought about by the tremendous pressure for schools to be more publicly accountable. The role is often considered to be of pivotal importance in a school's organisational structure, but not considered to be one of leadership (Ruwoldt, 2006), resulting in missed opportunities for dual functioning potential.

Moving from deputy to principal: principalship preparation

Deciding to change role from deputy to principal is a life changing decision, as it involves becoming someone different. Deputy principals need to be able to see themselves in the position of principal and to 'identify' themselves as a principal (Thomson, 2009) and, in doing so, make a successful transition into the role. 'Transitions' occur through a firm resolve to act on the basis of the mental, emotional and physical experiences of a related turning point (Duncan, 1995). People will only choose to change roles if the expected satisfaction from doing so exceeds that associated with their current position (Boskin, 1974) and if they receive support and encouragement from their colleagues – particularly the principal, who has first hand experience of the role. Their prior work experience and other elements such as age and family commitments are also considerable factors in their decision to move from deputyship to principalship.

Many studies deal with the role of principal teachers, quality of school management, school effectiveness and leadership effectiveness: Earley and Weindling (2004), Fidler and Atton (2004). There is less information available on preparing deputy principals for a principalship, and this is unfortunate as "overall, there seems to be a broad international consensus among policy makers that the capacities of those who aspire to become a principal need to be developed" (Cowie and Crawford, 2007, 132). Leadership preparation is an important influence on the ultimate performance of learners in educational settings, hence the emerging awareness among all the educational partners that the preparation and development of school leaders cannot be left to chance (Clarke, Wildy and Pepper, 2007). However, there is little agreement on how to organise and develop preparation for future leadership (Taysum, 2010) with contradictory views on whether or not principals' preparatory courses adequately prepare new principals for their roles, which is surprising, as "increasingly elaborate and extensive programs of training, assessment and certification, especially for school principals have mushroomed in many parts of the world" (Ribbins, 2008, p.61).

Few studies have explored in depth the nature of learning which supports management development – a very important area, as career motivation can be enhanced through career development support (Day and Allen, 2002). Earley and Weindling (2007) did, however, report that a key point in preparing for a principalship was the breadth of experience of a deputy principal, and their research revealed that the possibility of becoming a school principal without going through a considerable period as a deputy was very rare in secondary schools. Similarly, Fidler (1997) points out that the quality of headship is heavily influenced by the opportunity given to experience various tasks throughout the career path of teachers.

Draper and McMichael (1998) suggest that deputies who become principals would feel ready for the management role because of the extensive preparation they had undergone and because of their long-term initiation into a management identity. This substantiates the views of Cowie and Crawford (2007), who believe future principals need to have the opportunities to practise the skills and abilities the job demands in order to deal productively and confidently with the leadership and management issues they are likely to face on appointment. Given these findings it is hardly surprising that policy makers are increasingly turning to educational leadership preparation and development as a means to improve schools and student achievement (Hale and Moorman, 2003).

However, Crow (2004) argues that preparation for a contemporary principalship has not received comparable attention, despite awareness of the importance of leadership for school improvement and students' attainment. Fortunately, as can be seen from the literature, there are some indications that this is changing, and the interest in educational leadership and management has led to investment in the preparation and development of school leaders across many countries (Hallinger, 2003; Brundrett, 2001).

Research aims

The purpose of this enquiry was to explore the current role of the deputy-principalship in Irish primary schools and how its incumbents may be encouraged to progress their professional careers to principalship. It was set within paradigms of distributed leadership and role theory hence the exploration was widened to include discussions of principals' roles. The research used perceptions from a sample of Ireland's primary deputy principals to explore through the research questions:

- role definitions of deputy principalship,
- role definitions of principalship,
- features which might attract or dissuade deputies from proceeding further in their careers to principalship, and
- forms of principalship preparation to best encourage deputies to become principals.

Research methodology

This research adopted an interpretive qualitative approach. This theoretical perspective provided a context for the research process and a basis for its logic and its criteria. The reality of the social world emerges as a direct result of the processes by which respondents negotiate within it. This research sought to give respondents agency so that they could meaningfully engage in reflection about themselves and their personal context in the social world. The semi-structured interview was chosen to develop an understanding of the social reality in which respondents exist. There is a concern for the individual and the need to focus social inquiry on the meanings and values of people and their social actions. The interviews with 12 deputy principals provided valuable evidence about the current lived realities of Irish primary school leadership.

The research sample

Purposive sampling gave me control to select a specific target group who were primary deputy principals from the midland counties of Ireland. Deputy principal respondents fulfilled the criterion that respondents should have enough detailed information to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2007). Six respondents came from schools with a teaching principal and the remaining six came from schools with an administrative principal. This was deliberate so that meaningful comparisons from both principalship positions would be represented in the data. Both male and female deputy principals were chosen, as the literature showed that gender may have an impact on the willingness or unwillingness of applicants to apply for a principalship.

The research instrument

I chose semi-structured interviews as they allowed me to probe for more detailed responses, where respondents are asked to clarify what they have said (Gray, 2004). This allowed me broadly to control the agenda and the process of the interview, with the respondents being free to respond as they saw fit. It has predetermined questions but the order can be modified based upon what the interviewer finds appropriate. The semi-structured style of interview honoured the professional knowledge (tacit and explicit) of each voice. This approach provided qualitative depth and space for respondents to discuss the research questions from within their own frame of reference. Semi-structured interviews facilitated a reflexive, interviewee-centred, flexible and stimulating discursive environment, as proposed by Sarantakos (2005).

Research quality

I employed Lincoln and Guba's framework of trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The framework introduced in the 1980s gave fresh ways of expressing validity, reliability and generalisability "outside of the linguistic confines of a rationalistic paradigm" (Tobin and Begley, 2004, p.4). Their concepts of credibility and dependability provided the initial platform from which much of the current debate on rigour emerged. They refined their concept of trustworthiness by introducing criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Research findings

The initial impetus for this study came from a lack of Irish research pertaining to primary school deputy principals and their career advancement. Significant satisfaction in the role does not lead to a greater desire for principalship among the Irish deputies interviewed for this research. When the causes of this were investigated, current incumbents' experiences were found to lack any genuinely meaningful forms of capacity-building for principalship, and this links to earlier international literature on deputyship (Porter, 1996). This appears to add to deputies' limited career aims, since desires to remain a deputy (or to progress) were found to be closely connected to family, community, satisfaction in current role and the need for relatedness by being compliant rather than reflective or critical. In this regard, the study

underlines how Ireland's deputies do not differ in their career intentions from those as far away as Hong Kong (Walker and Kwan, 2009) or Australia (Cranston, 2007).

Nature and culture of Irish primary deputyship

During the analysis it became apparent that power, perceived power and power sharing have a huge bearing on deputyship, making it possible to broaden the data analysis. The theme is sub-divided into five key features which provide a deeper understanding of the nature of contemporary Irish primary deputyship, (i) maintaining order and stability, (ii) role clarity – potential to be clear or ambiguous, (iii) experience of school leadership, (iv) strong influence of the principal on the deputy principal role, (v) level of self-efficacy amongst deputy principals. These key features are summarised in Table 1.

Deputy principals operate within a particular social framework, each of them being socialised into their particular role meaning each deputy has a different role according to the school in which s/he works. The culture of the school impacts on them, with cultural norms influencing the way school leadership is exercised. The deputy influences school culture to a lesser degree. The findings revealed that, within schools, respondents have learnt the norms and expectations, often referred to as career socialisation. People in the schools interact with each other, and these interactions do not just emerge but are premeditated. This research demonstrates for Irish deputies the significance of social learning as discussed in international studies such as Super, 1953. In Irish primary schools, this social learning takes the form of social experiences on career trajectories impacting on an individual's self-conception.

Table 1: knowledge of the nature and culture of Irish primary deputyship

Maintaining order and stability	**Deputies**: ◈ are influenced by school culture ◈ are strongly acculturated to school norms ◈ are very concerned with school maintenance ◈ have little influence on school culture ◈ lack authority to exercise school leadership
Role ambiguity	**The vague role description leads to a:** ◈ limited definition of the role ◈ difficulty differentiating between role as educator and role as senior school leader
School leadership experience	**Deputies could expand their experiences of school leadership if they are:** ◈ given more opportunities to do so ◈ willing to make more opportunities to do so ◈ prepared to critically examine and change their own acculturations to existing patterns ◈ able to transcend the strength of school culture that militates against ◈ deputies' involvement in leadership

Principals' effect on deputy principals' role	**Principals are the greatest influence on deputy roles because:** ◆ deputies regard them as the main authority ◆ principals model values, behaviours and beliefs ◆ principals define parameters for deputies' roles ◆ principals control deputies' access to principals
Deputy principals' self efficacy	**Deputies have a low self efficacy because:** ◆ their authority comes from the principal ◆ they shape their practices according to the principals' vision ◆ principals' praise or disapproval highlights deputies' powerlessness ◆ deputies have little autonomy or decision-making powers ◆ principals' ideologies dominate schools

Emergent typologies of deputy principalship

From the preceding construction of the nature and culture of deputyship, three typologies of deputy principalship are suggested as appropriate to Irish primary schools' current managerial arrangements. For these it was decided to use the terms transactional, prescribed and strategic to best describe the deputies' characteristics that emerged from this study (summarised in Table 2). They are unique to this research and have not been adapted from anyone else's ideas. All respondents experienced one of the typologies, each encompassing their own properties. Distributed leadership is normally concerned with leadership practices beyond the principal and deputy principal; however, owing to the size of some of the primary schools involved in this study, it was not deemed necessary to move beyond these two leadership positions when observing leadership capacity.

Table 2: new typologies of deputy principalship for Irish primary schools

Transactional deputyship	◆ Duties assigned by principal through necessity on an ad hoc basis ◆ No specific list of responsibilities furnished to deputy-principal ◆ Designated tasks focus on the smooth running and organisation of the school ◆ Little or no contribution to the organisational learning ◆ No collegiality or collaborative culture ◆ Sole leadership resides with principal, who is unwilling to relinquish power and control ◆ Doesn't acknowledge potential for deputy-principal leadership ◆ 'Pseudo' leadership role ◆ Negative perception of principalship
Prescribed deputyship	◆ Duties assigned by principal ◆ Often conflicting priorities ◆ Responsibilities generally include drafting particular curricular or organisational policies ◆ Responsibility for maintenance and equipment issues ◆ Some scope to develop the leadership role beyond management duties ◆ No significant impact on teaching and learning outside of their own teaching responsibilities ◆ Negative perception of principalship ◆ Limited collegiality and collaborative culture present at leadership level

Strategic deputyship	◆ Based on planned opportunities for deputy to contribute to the development of leadership ◆ Shared leadership practice ◆ Open boundaries of leadership ◆ Opportunities to exercise leadership through strategic planning and policy development ◆ Direct involvement in decision-making ◆ Direct bearing on classroom practice ◆ Flexibility and autonomy ◆ Positive impact on the principalship

Transactional deputyship

Half of the sample (six respondents) were categorised within the transactional deputyship typology, which has very limited capacity in terms of its ability to implement any strategic actions aimed at school improvement. Within this typology respondents operate at a managerial level only. They are not required to function at a strategic level and this means they are curtailed in impacting directly on school improvement. This means that their level of influence on the school is limited and constrained. The research found an emphasis on principal-centred supervisory routines rather than on collaborative and shared leadership involving both principal and deputy being characterised by a lack of clarity.

Prescribed deputyship

One third of respondents were categorised within the prescribed deputyship typology. Unlike the previous typology they were furnished with a specific list of duties by the principal, who did not have the time, or desire, to undertake the particular management tasks himself or herself. This is the fundamental difference between transactional and prescribed deputyship. The deputy principals operate at a managerial level within this typology. They fulfil important maintenance duties within the school organisation that would otherwise have to be undertaken by another member of staff if they didn't undertake them. Leadership and management are equally important if schools are to operate smoothly and achieve their objectives (Bush, Bell and Middlewood, 2010). Gronn (2000) views distributed leadership as a form of aggregate leadership behaviour, but this is not wholly embraced in this typology.

Strategic deputyship

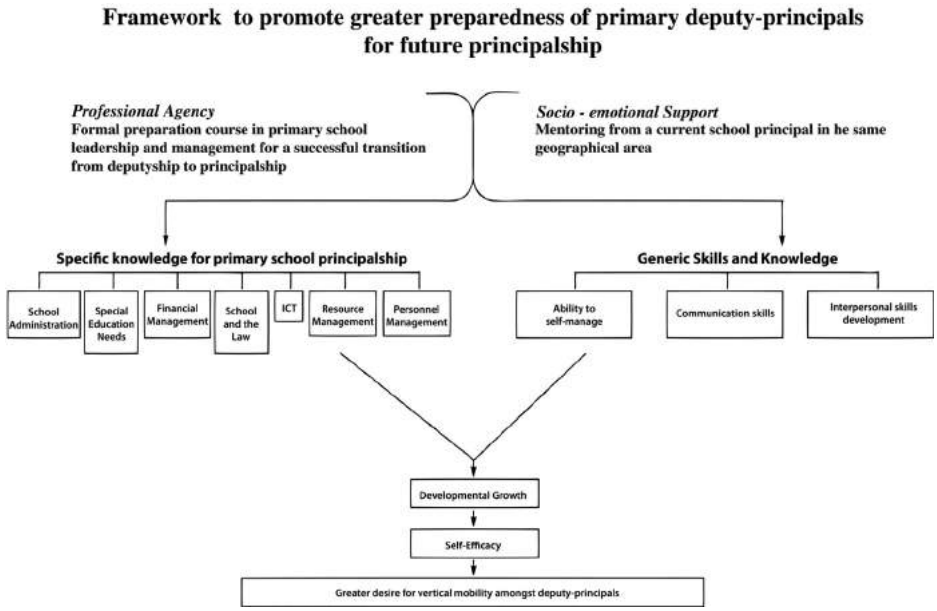
This final typology is significantly different from the previous two, and only two respondents were categorised within it. The dimensions within it are more in line with modern literature, pertaining to effective and sustainable school leadership teams through involvement with instructional and transformational leadership. Deputy principals within this typology operate at both strategic and managerial levels experiencing to some degree all the job responsibility characteristics of leadership categorised by Kwan's (2009) Hong Kong study into the deputy principalship as a preparation for principalship.

1. External communication and connection.
2. Quality assurance and accountability.
3. Teaching.
4. Learning and curriculum.

5. Staff management.
6. Resource management.
7. Leader and teacher growth and development.
8. Strategic direction and policy development.

Towards a professional form of principalship preparation

Fig 1: principalship preparation framework for deputy principals in Irish primary schools, 2013



Regardless of which deputyship typology respondents came under, 11 of the 12 respondents asserted a strong desire for a strategic principalship preparation model. This is linked to the research literature which found that principal preparation is a source of concern globally. The development of the initial deputy principalship typologies led to the construction of a proposed purpose-built framework (see Figure 1) to support, motivate and equip deputy principals in their vertical mobility irrespective of the three deputy principalship typologies. The preparation model proposed is an ideal based on the strategic deputyship typology and, therefore, routes into the preparation might need to be differently engineered according to the entrant's base category. However, without some form of professional development deputy-principals may not be confident to take up a principalship role in schools (Chi-Kin Lee, Kwan and Walyer, 2009). Deputy principals categorised under either the transactional deputyship typology or prescribed deputyship typology would benefit from a greater exposure to all of the components within the framework. Deputy principals fortunate enough to be categorised under the strategic deputyship typology may find that they already experience to some degree many of the individual components included on the framework. They could still benefit from mentoring by another school principal in a different school.

Each element of the framework impacts on the level of preparedness of Irish primary deputy principals for principalship in particular response to the inadequacies of the first two forms of distributed leadership (Transactional and Prescribed) in Irish primary schools. Respondents, regardless of what typology they were categorised under, were largely of the opinion that professional development for principalship may be significantly strengthened by incorporating direct strategies for formal, systematic pre-service leadership training such as those already well-established in North America, Europe and Australia, as a result of education reform and government policy initiatives. In providing such training in Ireland to meet deputies' needs, the obvious deficiencies identified in the experiences of deputies show a lack of knowledge of how to run schools at strategic levels. This is supported in literature from the USA finding that, "one of the great myths of education is that the position of assistant principal is not a proper and useful training ground for principalship," (Kelly, 1987, p.13). This finding emerged as central in this research. Therefore, the tenet of one role being entirely separate to the other was one of the first elements of which the new framework had to take account.

The structure of the support respondents described is illustrated on the framework (see Figure 1) and is in two parts: a formal preparation course with concern for intellectual capital, and mentoring focusing on social capital. Respondents would value the opportunity to support and be supported by deputy-principals from other schools as they construct their generic skills and knowledge. The deputies in this research believed a very content-specific course would adequately bridge the gap between their existing skills, knowledge and expertise and those needed to perform the role of principal. The content they identified as necessary for their developmental support focused on school administration, special education needs, financial management, school and the law, ICT, resource management, and personnel management (see Figure 1). These seven components highlight a skills deficit where it is evident that the inexperience of dealing with them evokes feelings of stress, anxiety and discomfort, creating a need to gain new knowledge and improve morale.

There was an acknowledgement that any form of leadership preparation is incremental. Respondents were not under any false illusions, knowing that participants would not emerge from a course fully armed with all the necessary skills and knowledge, but it would provide an opportunity for them to construct new knowledge. Respondents believed that the specific outcome from this form of preparation should be a pipeline of primary deputy principals possessing improved confidence, willingness and motivation towards principalship. This should result in greater respondent satisfaction and skill development, in turn resulting in leadership developmental growth (see Figure 1) among respondents.

Conclusion

This research revealed a majority of primary deputies in this study tacitly and explicitly reinforcing existing routines, failing to look at what leadership they currently exercise from a new perspective thus losing the opportunity to reconceptualise their role to become agents of change. Ireland's primary deputy principals continue to undertake many different duties which causes the role to lack a clearly defined list of duties and responsibilities. Ireland's

deputy principals view the principalship in the same way as their counterparts from other countries commenting on similar incentives and barriers involved in taking up this multi-faceted job. The suggested framework for principalship preparation, the first of its kind in Ireland, focuses on the relevant operational aspects of principalship not encountered in deputyship to be achieved through both a formal course and personal individualised mentorship.

References

Allen, T. (2003). *Two 'Heads' are Better Than One: An Examination and Analysis of the Role of the Deputy Principal in Irish Primary Schools*. Unpublished Master of Education Dissertation: National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

Armstrong, D. (2005). Leadership at the crossroads: Negotiating challenges, tensions and ambiguities in the transition from teaching to the vice-principalship. In: D. Armstrong (ed.) *Examining the Practice of School Administration in Canada*. Calgary, Alberta: Detselig Enterprises, 113–128.

Boskin, M.J. (1974). A Conditional Logit Model of Occupational Choice. *The Journal of Political Economy*, 82(2), 389-398.

Brundrett, M. (2001). The Development of School Leadership Preparation Programs in England and the USA: A comparative analysis. *Education Management, Administration and Leadership*, 29(2), 229–245.

Browne-Ferrigno, T. (2003). Becoming a principal: Role conception, initial socialization, role-identity transformation, purposeful engagement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(4), 468–503.

Bush, T. (2011). *Theories of educational leadership and management*. Fourth Edition. London: Sage.

Bush, T., Bell, L., and Middlewood, D. (eds.) (2010). *The Principles of Educational Leadership and Management. Second Edition*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Caldwell, B., and Spinks, J. (1998). *Beyond the self-managing school*. London: Falmer.

Chi-Kin Lee, J., Kwan, P., and Walker, A. (2009). Vice-principalship: their responsibility, roles and career aspirations. *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*, 12(2), 187-207.

Clarke, S., Wildy, H., and Pepper, C. (2007). Connecting Preparation with Reality: Primary Principals' Experiences of their first year out in Western Australia. *Leading and Managing*, 13(1), 81-90.

Cowie, M., and Crawford, M. (2007). Principal preparation – Still an act of faith? *School Leadership and Management*, 27(2), 129-146.

Cranston, N. (2007). Through the eyes of potential aspirants: Another view of the principalship. *School Leadership and Management*, 27(2), 109-128.

Cranston, N., Tromans, C., and Reugebrink, M. (2004). Forgotten leaders: What do we know about the deputy principalship in secondary schools? *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 7(3), 225-242.

Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five traditions*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Crow, G.M. (2004). *School Leader Preparation: A short review of the knowledge base*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

Crowley, M. (2006). *School Leadership: An Examination of the Role of the Irish Primary School Principal in a Period of Change and Rationalisation*. Unpublished doctorate thesis: University of Hull.

Day, R., and Allen, T.D. (2002). The relationship between career motivation and self-efficacy with protégé career success. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64(1), 72-91.

Day, C., Hall, C., Gammage, P., and Coles, M. (1993). *Leadership and curriculum in the primary school: The roles of senior and middle management*. London: Paul Chapman.

Day, C., and Leithwood, K. (eds.) (2007). *Successful Principal Leadership in Times of Change: An International Perspective*. The Netherlands: Springer.

Department of Education (1965). *Rules for National Schools under the Direction of the Department of Education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education (1973). Circular 16/73. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Draper, J., and McMichael, P. (1998). Making Sense of Primary Headship. *School Leadership and Management*, 18(2), 197-211.

Duncan, D. (1995). *Mature Women Entrants to Teaching: A case study*. Unpublished doctorate thesis: University of Warwick.

Earley, P., and Weindling, D. (2004). *Understanding School Leadership*. London: Sage.

Earley, P., and Weindling, D. (2007). Do School Leaders Have a Shelf Life? Career stages and headteacher performance. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 35(1), 73-88.

Fidler, B. (1997). Building on Success: Professional Development in the Future. In: H. Tomlinson (ed.) *Managing continuing professional development in schools*. London: Paul Chapman.

Fidler, B., and Atton, T. (2004). *The Headship Game*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Fullan, M., and Hargreaves, A. (1996). *What's Worth Fighting for in your School?* New York: Teachers College Press.

Glanz, J. (2004). *The Assistant Principal's Handbook: Strategies for Success*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.

Good, R. (2008). Sharing the secrets. *Principal Leadership*, 8(8), 46-50.

Gray, D.E. (2004). *Doing Research in the Real World*. London: Sage.

Greenfield, W.D. (1985). Studies of the Assistant Principalship: Toward New Avenues of Inquiry. *Education and Urban Society*, 18(1), 7-27.

Gronn, P. (2003). *The New Work of Educational Leaders: Changing Leadership Practice in an Era of School Reform*. London: Sage.

Gronn, P. (2000). Distributed Properties: A New Architecture for Leadership. *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, 28(3), 317-338.

Gronn, P., and Rawlings-Sanaei, F. (2003). Recruiting Schools Principals in a Climate of Leadership Disengagement. *Australian Journal of Education*, 46(2), 172-184.

Gross, H.A., Shapiro, M. and Meehan, J. (1980). How the Management Team Concept can Succeed. *NASSP Bulletin*, 64(436), 26-28.

Hale, E.L., and Moorman, H.N. (2003). *Preparing School Principals: A National Perspective on Policy and Program Innovations*. Washington, D.C: Institute for Educational Leadership, Illinois Education Research Council.

Hallinger, P. (2003). Leading Educational Change: Reflections on the practice of instructional and transformational leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33(3), 329-351.

Hallinger, P., and Heck, R.H. (1998). Exploring the Principal's Role in Effectiveness. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32(10), 5-44.

Hallinger, P., and Snidvongs, K. (2005). Adding Value to School Leadership and Management: A review of trends in the development of managers in the education and business sectors. (Online) Available at: www.ncsl.org.uk/publications (Accessed: 19 April 2011).

Harris, A. (2002). *School Improvement: What's in it for Schools?* London: Falmer Press.

Harris, A. and Townsend, A. (2007). Developing Leaders for Tomorrow: Releasing System Potential. *School Leadership and Management*, 27(2), 167-177.

Harvey, M. and Sheridan, B. (1995). Measuring the perception of the primary school deputy principal's responsibilities. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 33(4), 69-91.

Hatcher, R. (2005). The Distribution of Leadership and Power in Schools. *British Journal of Sociology in Education*, 26(2), 253-267.

House, R.J., Hanges, P.J., Javidan, M, Dorfman, P.W., and Gupta, V. (eds.) (2004). *Culture, leadership and organizations: The GLOBE study of 32 societies*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Jossey-Bass Inc. (2000). *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership*. First Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Kelly, G. (1987). The assistant principal as a training ground for the principalship. *NASSP Bulletin*, 71(501), 13-20.

Leadership Development for Schools (2007). *Improving School Leadership. Country Background Report for OECD Activity*. Clare: Clare Education Centre.

Leithwood, K.A., and Riehl, C. (2003). *What we Know about Successful School Leadership*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

Lincoln, Y.S., and Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry.* Newbury Park, California: Sage.

Long, F. (2008). Protocols of Silence in Educational Discourse. *Irish Educational Studies*, 27(2), 121-132.

Lumby, J. (2013). Distributed Leadership: The Uses and Abuses of Power. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 41(5), 581-597.

McEwan, E.W. (2003). *Seven Steps to Effective Instructional Leadership*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.

Máirtín, C. (ed.) (2007). *Gioraíonn Beirt Bóthar*. Cork: IPPN.

Marshall, C., and Hooley, R. (2006). *The Assistant Principal: Leadership Choices and Challenges*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.

Mayrowetz, D. (2008). Making Sense of Distributed Leadership: Exploring the Multiple Usages of the Concept in the Field. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44, 424-435.

Mertz, N.T. (2006). The organizational socialisation of assistant principals. *Journal of School Leadership*, 16(6), 644-675.

Muijs, D., and Harris, A. (2003). Assistant and Deputy Heads: Key leadership issues and challenges. *Management in Education*, 17(6).

Mulford, B. (2008). *The Leadership Challenge: Improving learning in schools*. Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research.

OECD (2008). *Improving school leadership: Comparative report*. November 2007. Draft (unpublished).

Oleszewski, A., Shoho, A., and Barnett, B. (2012). The development of assistant principals: a literature review. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 50(3), 264-286.

Porter, J.J. (1996). What is the Role of the Middle Level Assistant Principal, and How Should it Change? *NASSP Bulletin*, 80(578), 25-30.

Read, S.P. (2012). Factors that Influence the Preparedness of Teachers for the Vice Principal Role. In: A.R. Shoho, B.G. Barnett and A.K. Tooms (eds.) *Examining the Assistant Principalship*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing Inc.

Reeves, D.B. (2006). *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Ribbins, P. (2008). A life and career based framework for the study of leaders in education: Problems, possibilities and prescriptions. In: J. Lumby, G. Crow and P. Pashiardis (eds.) *International Handbook on the Preparation and Development of School Leaders*. New York; Oxon: Routledge, 61-80.

Ruwoldt, M.J. (2006). *To Lead or not to Lead: That is the Question. An Exploration of Understandings of Leadership in the Context of the Deputy Principal in the Lutheran Secondary School.* Unpublished doctorate thesis: Australian Catholic University.

Sarantakos, S. (2005). *Social Research*. Third Edition. New York: Palgreave.

Scoggins, A.J., and Bishop, H.L. (1993). *A Review of the Literature Regarding the Roles and Responsibilities of the Assistant Principal*. New Orleans, Louisiana: Mid-South Educational Research Organization.

Senge, P.M. (2000). Give me a Lever Long Enough... and Single-handed I can Move the World. In: Jossey-Bass Inc. *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership*. First Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 13-25.

Smith, J.M. (1987). Assistant Principals: New Demands, New Realities, and New Perspectives. *NASSP Bulletin*, 71(501), 9-12.

Spillane, J. (2006). *Distributed Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Super, D.E. (1953). A theory of vocational development. *American Psychologist*, 8, 185-190.

Taysum, A. (2010). *Evidence Informed Leadership in Education*. London: Contunuum.

Thomson, P. (2009). *School Leadership – Heads on the Block*. London: Routledge.

Tobin, G.A., and Begley, C.M. (2004). Methodological rigour within a qualitative framework. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 48(4), 388-396.

Tripkin, P.M. (2006). *The assistant principalship: Becoming a school administrator*. Unpublished doctorate thesis. New York: Fordham University.

Ummanel, A. (2012). *School principals' career path: Ireland, Cyprus and Malta sample*. Unpublished D.Ed. Thesis: Dublin City University.

Wahlstrom, K., and Louis, K. (2008). How Teachers Experience Principal Leadership: The Roles of Professional Community, Trust, Efficacy, and Shared Responsibility. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), 458-495.

Walker, A., and Kwan, P. (2009). Linking Professional, School, Demographic, and Motivational Factors to Desire for Principalship. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 45(4), 590-615.

Weller, L.D., and Weller, S.J. (2002). *The Assistant Principal: Essentials for Effective School Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.

Winter, P.A. (2002). *Applicant Attraction to Assistant Principal Jobs: An Experimental Assessment*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA), Pittsburgh, PA, November.

In this issue

Anne Looney	**Curriculum politics and practice: from 'implementation' to 'agency'**
Duncan McCarthy and Brian Murphy	**The challenge of supporting literacy in a digital age: perspectives of Irish primary school teachers**
Carol Constant and Tracey Connolly	**An exploration of formative assessment practices on children's academic efficacy**
Joanne Jackson and Lorraine Harbison	**An evaluation of the utility of homework in Irish primary school classrooms**
Conor Mulcahy	**The challenges, dilemmas and opportunities associated with implementing inclusion in an Irish primary school: the school stakeholders' perspective**
Anne Horan	**Nationalism, prejudice and intercultural education**
Derek Grant	**Becoming a primary school principal in Ireland: deputy principalship as preparation**

into
Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
35 Parnell Square
Dublin 1

Telephone: 01 804 7700
Email: info@into.ie
Web: www.into.ie
Mobile web: m.into.ie

General Secretary: Sheila Nunan

Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann
35 Cearnóg Pharnell
Baile Átha Cliath 1

Guthán: 01 804 7700
Ríomhphost: info@into.ie
Gréasán: www.into.ie
Suíomh móibíleach: m.into.ie

Árd Rúnaí: Sheila Nunan