
Language
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and Literacy
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for the
.....
New Millennium
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EDITORS:

Gerry Shiel

Ursula Ní Dhálaigh

Eithne Kennedy

READING ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND
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PREFACE

Much has happened since the Reading Association of Ireland published its last volume, *Developing Language and Literacy: The Role of the Teacher*, in 1998. A revised *English Language Primary School Curriculum* has been launched and all primary teachers have received some inservice training in the implementation of this curriculum. A new English Leaving Certificate Syllabus has been implemented in second-level schools. The White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*, has been published. And the National Reading Initiative has been launched with the objective of raising the awareness of the general public regarding the importance of reading.

The current volume, *Language and Literacy for the New Millennium*, is a compilation of papers delivered at recent conferences and seminars of the Reading Association of Ireland. In addition to reflecting on some of the changes that have occurred recently, the papers point to the way forward in four related areas – oral language, reading, writing and assessment of literacy.

An important feature of the revised primary curricula for English and Irish is the strong emphasis on the development of oral language. This emphasis is reflected in the current volume where no fewer than three articles deal with the development of listening and speaking skills. In her article, ‘Language in the Revised Primary School Curriculum’, Anne McGough emphasises the importance engaging children in ‘the kind of talk which goes beyond everyday communications in the classroom’, in order to provide them with ‘maximum cognitive challenge’ from an early stage. In addition to focusing on acquisition of language as a system, she stresses the important role of language in developing pupils’ thinking skills, and in promoting emotional and imaginative development. In her article on ‘Oral Language Development in the Early Years at School’, Liz Dunphy suggests a number of strategies for engaging pupils in oral language work, and illustrates how pair work can be used to engage children in exploring story. Strategies such as pair work are relevant to the implementation of the revised *English Language Primary School Curriculum* and the revised curricula in other subjects as well. The article, ‘Irish as a Second Language: Bringing Theory to Practice’, by Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Frances Uí Chinnéide, describes a programme offered by the Dublin Institute of Technology to language assistants (tutors)

working with children in Gaeltacht schools for whom Irish is a second language. The comprehensive nature of the course that was offered, and the impact it had on the work of the language assistants, have implications for improving oral language instruction in a range of settings where children encounter difficulties.

The articles in the second section of the volume deal with the teaching of reading, though several are also relevant to oral language and writing. Three articles deal with issues relating to literature for children. In 'Morality as an Ideology in Children's Fiction – Celebrating Children's Literature in Ireland', Frank Flannagan and Áine Cregan reflect on the role of story in children's development and examine, in particular, how children's moral development can be shaped by what they read. In a related article, 'Folk and Fairly Tales in Sanctioned Reading Schemes in Primary Schools', Mary Shine Thompson describes the different types of story that may be found in sanctioned English reading schemes, and argues that some stories may not impart the Christian standards implied in curriculum documents and official statements. David Carey and Seán Griffin, in their article, 'Adler, Froebel and Reading Pedagogy: A Spirituality of Children's Literacy', apply a philosophy of spirituality espoused by Adler and Froebel to the training of teachers and to the development of children's understanding of stories – an understanding that goes beyond basic comprehension, yet can be nourished by sensitive teachers.

Two articles deal with the teaching of basic elements of the reading process. George Hunt, in 'Language Play and Vocabulary Development in the Primary School', presents ten strategies for developing children's knowledge of word meanings. A feature of the strategies is their generative nature – after children learn a strategy, they can apply it to acquiring new words in different contexts or extending their understanding of words already encountered. Throughout the article, George stresses the need to develop an 'attitude of curiosity towards words' in children and to encourage 'spontaneous play with language'. In 'A Multiple Curricula Approach for Developing Comprehension with Low-Achieving Readers', Timothy Blair stresses the need for teachers to allocate time to the development of reading comprehension, and the need to teach children how to engage in various comprehension processes including interpretative comprehension, critical comprehension, strategic comprehension and content subject comprehension.

Timothy emphasises the importance of the dialogue that occurs between teacher and pupils during comprehension development.

Antóin Ó Dubhghaill's article, 'Perspectives on Learning Support Policy and Practice in Irish Schools: The Urgency of a Whole-School Initiative' points to serious difficulties with the provision of learning support (formerly 'remedial education') in primary and post-primary schools. While some progress has been made at primary level in addressing these difficulties with the recent publication of new *Learning-Support Guidelines* by the Department of Education and Science, attention now needs to be given to the effective implementation of the *Guidelines*. In addition, there is a need to address the difficulties that arise in implementing learning support programmes in post-primary schools. Antóin's proposal for a whole-school approach to addressing learning difficulties is equally relevant at both primary and post-primary levels, though schools may need assistance in implementing such an approach. In her article, 'Reading in Romanian Schools: New Directions', Adela-Lumina Rogojinaru also deals with the issues of pedagogical and organisational change. While the gist of her article is largely positive, she identifies potential impediments to progress including the inclusion of children's literature as merely an optional element of the language curriculum at primary and post-primary levels. In common with several of the Irish authors in this volume, Adela dwells on the importance of empowering teachers to implement change through the provision of appropriate inservice training.

Two of the four articles on writing deal primarily with instructional issues. In 'Developing Self-esteem through Writing Activities: A Unit of Work for Pupils with Learning Difficulties at the Senior Primary Level', Finian O'Shea illustrates how children's writing can be developed by providing a range of writing activities that focus on various aspects of children's own lives. The activities are consistent with the thinking underlying the teaching of writing in the *English Language Primary School Curriculum*, and allow for in-depth interaction between teacher and pupils, and between pupils themselves. Among the formats that are suggested are writing logs, diaries and letters. In her article, 'Write Out of This World – The Process and the Product', Mary Meaney describes a writing programme she implemented in a combined second-third class, and shows how the publication

of a book based on the programme resulted in high levels of motivation among pupils, and a high level of writing quality. The article illustrates how the programme again capitalised on pupils' own interests and feelings.

The remaining articles on writing deal with the quality of undergraduate academic writing, and with the teaching of writing in schools. In 'Undergraduate Academic Writing: An Analysis of Errors and Weaknesses and Syntax, Lexis, Style and Structure', Anne O'Keeffe examines the errors made by undergraduate students as they engage in writing non-fiction texts. While some of the errors are quite humorous, others are quite basic, and raise issues about the teaching of writing in primary and post-primary schools, and the strategies schools may need to implement to facilitate pupils' ability to meet the demands of academic writing in third-level institutions and in real life contexts. In 'Writing in the Revised English Language Curriculum for Primary Schools: Are Teachers Ready?', Fidelma Healy-Eames raises concerns about the readiness of teachers to embrace the process-based approach to writing that is embedded in the revised curriculum. While teachers in her study were in favour of meaning-based approaches to teaching writing that capitalised on links between oral language and writing, they experienced difficulties in implementing such approaches in their classrooms. At the conclusion of the article, Healy-Eames provides four recommendations that are relevant in the context of implementing the writing element of the revised *English Language Primary School Curriculum*, and in the context of more general efforts to improve the quantity and quality of children's writing.

The final two articles in this volume deal with assessment. The first, 'Measuring Reading in the New Millennium: The Pennsylvania Reading Assessment' by Jeanne Cranks, is interesting from several perspectives. First, in the context of the forthcoming publication of the report on *The 1998 National Assessment of English Reading*, it is interesting to observe how Pennsylvania implements a standards-based approach to state-level assessment that specifies 'what a student should know and be able to do at a specified grade level'. While the framework underpinning the Pennsylvania reading assessment is quite similar to that used in our own national assessment of reading in fifth class, the purposes of the assessment are somewhat different. Second, in the context of concerns about the quality of

children's writing, the work being undertaken in Pennsylvania suggests that a writing assessment might be implemented in parallel with our national reading assessment, without undue difficulty.

The second article dealing with assessment, 'Assessing Children's Oral Language' by Gerry Shiel, outlines the difficulties that arise in assessing the performance of pupils in oral language and provides suggestions for assessing language competence in the context of everyday classroom activities. The suggestions, which are in line with the approach to assessment put forward in the revised English Language Primary School Curriculum, enable teachers to observe critical features of pupils' development in speaking and listening, and to maintain records of performance over time. The suggestions for engaging pupils in assessing their own oral language development may be of particular interest to teachers of pupils in the senior primary classes.

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