
Reading Matters: A Fresh Start

EDITORS:
Gerry Shiel
Ursula Ní Dhálaigh

Reading Association of Ireland / National Reading Initiative

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Published by
Reading Association of Ireland
c/o Educational Research Centre
St Patrick's College
Drumcondra, Dublin 9

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ISBN:0-9526511-3-0

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Origination: Hilary Walshe

Printed in the Republic of Ireland by e-print, Dublin

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Preface

In September 2000, the Reading Association of Ireland and the National Reading Initiative jointly organised an International Reading Conference, which was held in Malahide, Co. Dublin. The theme of the Conference (and the title of the current volume), *Reading Matters: A Fresh Start*, represents the sense of optimism felt by the joint organisers when the idea of the Conference was first discussed early in 2000. It was hoped that the Conference would provide an opportunity for national and international experts in the reading field to discuss emerging trends and ideas with persons involved in the literacy field here in Ireland. This hope was realised as the experts presented their work and discussed it with over 300 participants for three days. The purpose of this volume is to extend that discussion.

Both the National Reading Initiative and the International Conference arose from concerns about literacy standards. National and international reports on the International Adult Literacy Survey indicated that literacy standards in the adult population were poor, and might adversely affect the quality of life of individuals, and the competitiveness of the Irish economy. A report on the outcomes of the 1998 National Assessment of English Reading indicated that reading standards among primary-level pupils had not changed between 1980 and 1998, despite increased provision of library resources to schools, and the expansion of a learning support service to address the needs of all pupils with low achievement in reading. Several studies pointed to low levels of reading achievement among pupils in schools in designated areas of educational disadvantage, and among boys. Teachers and parents continued to be challenged in their efforts to address the needs of pupils with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia.

There is some evidence that literacy standards may be improving. In the recent OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), just one country (Finland) had a significantly higher mean score in reading literacy than Ireland. Moreover, a relatively small proportion of Irish students were judged to have serious reading difficulties. While these findings are welcome, educators realise, nevertheless, that some children and adults continue to have poor literacy skills, and need additional support to address

their needs and fulfil their potential. Hence, the suggestions for improving the teaching and assessment of reading, outlined in several papers in this volume, continue to be relevant.

In organising the papers by theme, three broad categories suggested themselves: the assessment of reading, the teaching of reading, and reading difficulties. It must be acknowledged, however, that some of the papers address aspects of two or more of these areas, and that, in some cases, the decision to assign a paper to one or other category provoked much debate among the editors.

There are four articles in the section dealing with the assessment of reading. In his article on *Reading Literacy Standards in Ireland*, Thomas Kellaghan discusses how the print media have, at times, exaggerated the extent of literacy difficulties among the adult population, but acknowledges that national and international studies of reading involving school-age children point to low achievement, particularly among boys. In *Reading Assessment as an Instrument of Pedagogic Reform*, Kathy Hall describes how informal assessments of reading can supplement the outcomes of standardised measures, and provide teachers, students and parents, with valuable qualitative information on areas of strength and need. The content of the paper is particularly relevant as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment develops its policies on assessment in relation to implementation of the revised Primary School Curriculum. In *An Evolving Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education*, Madeline O'Donohue and Terry McCann reflect on recent developments in the evaluation of adult literacy programmes at local level, and discuss key features of such developments, including the participation of students in programme evaluations. Finally, Scott Murray, in his article, *Assessing Adult Literacy: IALS and Beyond* reflects on the outcomes of the International Adult Literacy Survey, including relationships between the literacy skills of individuals and economic returns in the workplace.

The section on the teaching of reading consists of six articles. In *Reading in a Second Language: Teaching Irish Reading*, Tina Hickey reflects on ways in which the teaching of Irish reading might be improved by describing several research-based strategies that are consistent with aims and methods underpinning the revised Primary School Curriculum for Gaeilge. It should,

of course, be acknowledged that several of the strategies that Kathy describes are also relevant to the teaching of reading in a pupil's first language. In *Peer and Parent-Assisted Learning*, Keith Topping provides a comprehensive overview of the effects of tutoring (whether by peers or parents) on achievement in reading, spelling, writing, thinking, and social competence. The procedures described by Keith are relatively easy to implement, yet the gains in achievement and motivation that can arise from successful implementation are substantive.

Robert Dunbar's *Circles and Triangles, Sharks and Wishbones: The World of Irish Young Adult Fiction* is less concerned with instructional strategies, and more with the themes and motivations explored by authors such as June Considine, Mark O'Sullivan, Siobhán Parkinson and Gretta Mulrooney. Robert's article underlines the tremendous strides that have been made by Irish writers in recent years, and the rich and enriching literature that awaits those who have made some progress in learning to read. Articles on *What Place for Poetry in the National Reading Initiative?* (Pauline Kelly) and *Reading in the Context of the New Leaving Certificate English Syllabus* (Kevin McDermott) provide valuable insights into the thinking behind the teaching of reading in general, and the teaching of poetry in particular, in the New Syllabus. Colin Harrison's article on *Reading Development at Secondary Level*, focuses on the role of staff development in implementing school-level literacy programmes, particularly in inner-city schools, and explores strategies for developing reading fluency, comprehension and motivation to read. Though dealing with second level, many of the proposals put forward in the article could equally well apply to primary level.

The final section, which deals with reading difficulties, has four articles. The articles on *Improving Reading Literacy for Low-Income Children* (Timothy Shanahan) and *Family Literacy: A Shared Activity in Caring Contexts* (Sheila Wolfendale) focus on the difficulties that economically-disadvantaged students may encounter in acquiring literacy, and how those difficulties can be addressed in school and at home. While Timothy Shanahan outlines principles underpinning successful intervention programmes for at-risk readers, Sheila Wolfendale addresses some of the definitional and conceptual issues surrounding current family literacy interventions, including the empowerment of parents. The last two articles

deal with dyslexia. In *Closing the Gaps in Reading Attainment: When Dyslexia Is Successfully Managed*, Philomena Ott addresses the identification of learning difficulties arising from dyslexia, and puts forwards general principles for increasing the reading skills of students with such difficulties. In *Dyslexia, Metacognition and Learning Styles*, Gavin Reid examines factors associated with dyslexia, and shows how a focus on developing students' metacognitive knowledge and tailoring instruction according to their preferred learning styles can yield dividends.

On behalf of the Reading Association of Ireland and the National Reading Initiative, we wish to extend our thanks to all those who helped with the production of this volume. Particular thanks are due to the authors, for their co-operation and willingness to answer queries. Thanks are also due to Hilary Walshe of the Educational Research Centre, for assisting in every aspect of the production of this volume.

Finally, it is with great sadness that we reflect on the untimely death, one year after the Conference, of Seán Hunt, Deputy Chief Inspector at the Department of Education and Science. Seán, a long-time friend of the Reading Association of Ireland, was very involved in establishing the National Reading Initiative, and making the joint International Reading Conference possible. Ar dheis Dé, go raibh a anam.

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Funding for this publication was provided by the In-career Development Unit, which is co-funded by the Department of Education and Science and the European Social Fund, and by the National Development Plan 2000-2006, through the Department of Education and Science and the National Reading Initiative.

Preface. *Reading Matters: A Fresh Start*. Dublin: Reading Association of Ireland, 2001, pp. v-viii.

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