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7 Reading Achievement in Children from Disadvantaged Areas: Views of Teachers and Parents

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Introduction

A key target of the 2001 *Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy* (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 2001) is a halving of the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties in designated disadvantaged primary schools by 2006. Arising from this target, the Department of Education and Science (DES) asked the Educational Research Centre to conduct a survey of reading standards in these schools. The aims of the survey were to establish baseline data on the proportion of pupils with 'serious reading difficulties', and to make recommendations to assist the DES and schools to reach the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) target. A report on the survey – *Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary Schools* (Eivers, Shiel & Shortt) – was published in 2004.

The survey (henceforth referred to as the Literacy Survey) contained quantitative and qualitative elements. To provide context, some quantitative elements (reading achievement data) are described briefly below. However, the main focus of this paper is the qualitative element of the survey (interviews with parents, teachers and principals) in order to establish their views on promoting reading achievement in designated disadvantaged schools.

Reading Achievement in Designated Disadvantaged Schools

Numerous Irish studies have found that, in designated disadvantaged schools, or in schools with many disadvantaged pupils, average reading achievement is poorer than in non-designated schools or in standardization samples (e.g., Archer & O'Flaherty, 1991; Cosgrove, Kellaghan, Forde & Morgan, 2000; Hayes & Kernan, 2001; McDonald, 1998; Weir & Eivers, 1998; Weir, Milis & Ryan, 2002).

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Unfortunately, none of the studies cited describe the reading achievements of pupils in a range of disadvantaged schools. Some focus on achievement in Breaking the Cycle schools (a very disadvantaged subset of schools). Others are based on test standardisation samples, and national and international studies, and do not sample enough disadvantaged schools to provide precise estimates of performance. The Literacy Survey was designed to address these shortcomings.

In June 2003, baseline data were obtained on the reading achievement of almost 6,500 pupils in First, Third and Sixth classes in a representative sample of designated disadvantaged schools. Pupils were assessed using a new test, the *Drumcondra Sentence Reading Test* (DSRT), standardised on a nationally representative sample in 2002. Test results revealed that pupils in the Literacy Survey had lower average scores than pupils nationally, with the difference ranging from 8 points in First class to 11 points in Third class (Table 1.1). As the standard deviation for the DSRT is 15 points, these differences in mean achievement are very sizeable.

TABLE 1: AVERAGE SCALE SCORES NATIONALLY AND FOR THE LITERACY SURVEY

	1st class	3rd class	6th class
Nationally	100.0	100.0	100.0
Literacy Survey	91.6	89.0	90.4

Although one of the main aims of the survey was to establish the proportion of pupils in designated disadvantaged schools with serious reading difficulties, the term is not defined in NAPS documentation. However, the DES views pupils who score at or below the 10th percentile (i.e., in the lowest 10% of test scores) on nationally standardised tests of reading as needing additional support. Thus, for the Literacy Survey, this marker was taken as indicating ‘serious reading difficulties’.

Our data revealed that far more pupils in designated schools than in the general primary school population scored at or below the 10th percentile (i.e., have ‘serious reading difficulties’). While, by definition, 10% of pupils in the standardisation of the DSRT score at or below the 10th percentile, up to 30% of pupils in the Literacy Survey achieved scores at that level (Table 1.2). Further, only 3% to 4% of pupils in the Literacy Survey, compared to 10% in the standardisation sample, achieved scores at or above the 90th percentile (i.e., are high achieving readers).

Having established baseline data on reading achievement in designated disadvantaged schools, my colleagues and I began to formulate recommendations to facilitate schools and the DES in reaching the NAPS target. As part of this process, we consulted with parents and school staff.

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF PUPILS IN THE DSRT STANDARDISATION STUDY AND LITERACY SURVEY WHO SCORED AT OR BELOW THE 10TH PERCENTILE, OR AT OR ABOVE THE 90TH PERCENTILE.

	1st class		3rd class		6th class	
	≤ 10th	≥ 90th	≤10th	≥ 90th	≤10th	≥ 90th
Nationally	9.9	10.4	9.8	10.0	10.0	10.0
Literacy Survey	26.7	4.1	29.5	2.9	27.2	2.8

Views from the Interviews

In January 2004, six group interviews (two with groups of principals, two with teachers, and two with parents) were conducted. Interviews were held in two locations: a Dublin suburb, and a country town (henceforth referred to as the urban and country areas). Ten principals, 26 teachers and 24 parents were interviewed, representing ten schools. The remainder of this paper presents a selection of the views represented at the interviews, followed by a short discussion of some of the points raised. More details about the methodology and respondents' views are available in Eivers *et al*. (2004).

1. The National Anti-Poverty Strategy Target

Urban principals were the only group who believed that the NAPS target for literacy might be achievable. However, to have any chance of attaining the target, they thought that adequate resources, a language support unit and an effective language programme were required in each school. They also felt that teachers' efforts were constrained by the extent of parental support. Therefore, any initiatives planned in association with the NAPS target should involve parents. Teaching staff in the urban area were less positive and felt that the target was unlikely to be achieved, citing the very disadvantaged nature of their enrolment.

As on many of the issues discussed, there was a distinct urban/country divide. All country participants thought it highly unlikely that the NAPS target would be reached. They felt that the very poor level of resources in their schools – from lack of quality or subsidised pre-school programmes, to long delays in assessments and assigning resource teachers, to lack of support in dealing with non-attendance – militated against the target being reached.

2. Pre-School Programmes / Early Intervention

Although the Early Start pre-school programme was available only in the urban area, most parents had experience of some form of pre-school or Montessori. Parents found pre-school to be very beneficial. Perhaps surprisingly, many felt that its main benefits were not the pre-academic skills children learned, but the understanding it gave parents of what children needed to know, and the broader concepts it taught children (concentrating in class and co-operating with a group).

Teachers and principals also recognised benefits from attendance at pre-school, particularly Early Start, attendance. Pre-schools were perceived to bolster language development and readiness to read, and it was felt that schemes such as Early Start should be extended. However, urban principals criticised many programmes in disadvantaged areas for an over-reliance on Community Employment schemes for staffing. Many not only had staff without an appropriate qualification, but sometimes without adequate literacy skills.

Teachers in both locations discussed how pre-school availability affected pupil age in Junior Infants. Urban teachers felt that the Early Start requirement that attendees be 3 years old meant that many ‘young’ 4 year olds (i.e., those born in September or October) started school as soon as they completed Early Start or turned 4. In contrast, country teachers felt that the lack of a state-sponsored pre-school in their area meant that many parents who could not afford private pre-school sent their children to school as soon as it was possible to do so. Despite different causes for their concerns, both groups agreed that very young pupils were generally at a disadvantage relative to their older classmates.

3. Parent-School Interaction

All groups interviewed recognized the importance of good home-school interaction. Indeed, perhaps the commonest suggestion made was that such interaction ‘be improved’, although specifics were typically

lacking. In both locations, the Home-School Community Liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator was described as central to home-school interactions, and there was clearly a very good relationship between the co-ordinator and parents in the schools visited. That aside, there were distinct differences in parent-school interactions, based on Junior class/Senior class and urban/country divides.

Parents with children in Junior classes had more contact with teachers than those whose children were in Senior classes. One reason was that younger children were likely to be brought to the classroom door (rather than left at the school gate), thus providing chances for informal parent-teacher meetings. Parents also felt that older children are not always enthusiastic about their parent visiting the school, while comments from teachers indicated that many of the programmes to stimulate parental involvement were targeted at parents of children in Junior classes.

Perhaps more surprising was the large urban/country difference. Parents in the country area seemed far less comfortable in the school, and much more wary of teaching staff (with the exception of the HSCL co-ordinator) than did their urban counterparts. Our perceptions in this regard were supported by country teachers, who reported many difficulties in establishing parental involvement. There were also differences in how teacher contact was viewed by parents. Many urban parents discussed the new techniques for improving their child's reading they had picked up from talking to teachers. In contrast, country parents did not feel they learned very much from talking to teachers.

Aside from the country/urban differences, parents in both areas felt that they would have benefited from more information from the school, particularly before their child started school, and in relation to beginning reading. Many parents felt they did not really understand how to prepare their child for reading. Further, parents from the country area did not seem to understand the importance of oral language skills, or how such skills related to academic progress.

4. The English Curriculum

The *Curriculum Guidelines* for English (NCCA, 1999) were described by teachers as vague, over-long, and without enough practical information. Some said that parts of the *Guidelines* were so vague that they were occasionally unsure if, at the end of a lesson, they had achieved the relevant curricular goals. The *Guidelines* were also criticised for being directed at middle class and middle ability pupils. Further, some believed

that the most recent changes had led to a reduction in the time allocated to reading, which was perceived to have a disproportionately negative effect on disadvantaged pupils. While none wanted a separate curriculum for designated schools, teachers felt that some recognition of disadvantaged pupils would be helpful.

All teachers felt that the greater emphasis on oral language represented an improvement on the older curriculum. However, the country teachers expressed difficulties with conducting oral language lessons, as most had been trained prior to the emphasis on oral skills, and felt they lacked sufficient background knowledge and resources to teach oral skills as well as they would like.

Some teachers in the country area felt that while they emphasised oral language in class, pupils received little practice when they went home. However, none indicated that they had given parents any advice about how to promote oral language. Indeed, as noted earlier, country parents did not seem to grasp the importance of oral language development, making it rather less likely that they would try to develop such specific skills in their child.

While parents were not asked directly about their views on the English curriculum, comments on other topics can also be related to the curriculum. For example, all parents agreed that the simplest way to stimulate interest in reading was to use materials that are interesting to the individual child. They recognised children's diverse interests and felt that teaching materials that catered to these diverse interests were more likely to be effective than materials that were perceived to be uninteresting. Further, urban parents felt strongly that more time should be spent teaching reading, as a child who could not read would fall behind in all curriculum areas.

5. Pre-Service Teacher Training

Teachers in both areas repeatedly discussed how pre-service training did not provide them with sufficient understanding of the processes underlying reading. These views were shared by principals, who noted that many of their newer staff had difficulty in teaching reading, despite otherwise being very competent. There was a consensus that student teachers needed more information on the processes underlying reading (particularly emergent reading) and more advice on how to develop phonological awareness in pupils.

Discussion

In this section, I discuss some of the more salient points raised regarding the NAPs targets, quality of staffing, age of school entry, the intervention between home and school, and the curriculum.

1. The NAPS Target

The balance of views from the interviews was that the NAPS target for literacy in designated schools was not achievable by 2006. At the time, no specific programmes had been implemented to help reach the NAPS targets, making it unlikely that the target could successfully be reached in a two-year period. Further, new interventions can take several years to achieve maximum impact (Fullan, 2001). Consequently, teacher views and research suggest that the time period for achieving the NAPS target should be lengthened considerably.

2. Quality of Staffing in Pre-School Programmes

Urban principals' misgivings about the level of qualifications and the literacy skills of some staff employed in pre-school programmes in disadvantaged areas are not without foundation. A national review of childcare and pre-school provision (Area Development Management, 2000) found that 23% of staff in such facilities had no formal qualifications, and that the level of qualifications was poorest amongst those on Community Employment and Jobs Initiative schemes (i.e., those most likely to be working in disadvantaged areas). Thus, children most in need of intervention from qualified professionals are also most likely to be in the care of an unqualified person. It would seem appropriate that the issue of accreditation for staff on such schemes be urgently examined.

3. 'Young' Junior Infants Pupils

Teachers worried that attendance at Early Start in some areas, or lack of affordable pre-school programmes in others, encouraged 'young' Junior Infants pupils. Such pupils were perceived to be at a disadvantage, relative to their older classmates. Achievement data from the Literacy Survey (Eivers *et al.,* 2004) support teachers' views (younger than average First class pupils have lower average achievement scores than their classmates). One option might be to narrow the age range between optional and compulsory enrolment in primary school. However, a simpler option

might be to promote greater consultation between pre-school staff, parents and school staff about whether a child is 'ready' to enrol in primary school.

4. Parent-School Interaction

There was a marked urban/country divide in the extent and nature of parent-school interaction. Some of the differences between the areas may be because schools in the urban area had participated in the HSCL scheme since its inception, while it was relatively new to the country school. Perhaps the development of trust and interaction between schools and families is a gradual process, and schemes such as the HSCL scheme need to operate for a number of years before the more significant benefits become apparent. Another reason for the geographical split may be that the urban schools were involved in many schemes, and had various sources of finance for the quite diverse home-school activities organised. This was not true of the country area.

Parents in both areas (even those whose children had attended a form of pre-school) felt that schools should give parents more information prior to children starting school. One method praised as effective was a pre-school pack for parents, including guidance on what a Junior Infant child was expected to know before they started school, and a set of colouring and very simple picture/reading books. Schools' efforts to develop 'informed' parents can meet many obstacles. However, both parents and teachers acknowledge the benefits of parental understanding of the requirements of school. Therefore, it is important that such efforts continue, in as many and as varied forms as possible (e.g., packs for parents, meetings, courses for parents).

5. The Curriculum

While critical of a perceived middle class bias in the *Guidelines*, teachers did not advocate a separate curriculum for disadvantaged schools. However, urban parents felt that more time should be devoted to teaching reading, as it provided the foundation upon which many other curriculum areas are based. Similarly, some teachers worried that reading lesson time was reduced because of the most recent curriculum changes. The *Guidelines* allow a certain amount of discretionary time (often largely allocated to English lessons by teachers in disadvantaged schools). However, even if all discretionary curriculum time were to be allocated solely to English or to reading, the time allocated would fall short of that recommended by research as necessary in very disadvantaged settings

(e.g., Slavin & Madden, 2003). Therefore, an expansion of reading lesson time, at least in the Junior classes, is something that needs consideration.

6. Developing Oral Language Skills

Many teachers in the country area felt that the increased curricular emphasis on oral language was not adequately supported by their initial teacher training. A teacher who feels ill-equipped to develop pupils' oral language skills may also lack the confidence to advise parents on this matter. Urban parents described how teachers had advised them on how to improve their child's vocabulary. In contrast, country parents seemed not to understand the importance of developing oral language skills, perhaps reflecting teachers' lack of confidence in this area. Thus, while recently qualified teachers may have an adequate grounding in oral language development, appropriate in-career development (ICD) for more experienced teachers would be of benefit.

7. Pre-Service and Inservice Teacher Training

Non-teachers would be surprised to find that many teachers feel inadequately prepared to teach reading, given that reading and writing are 'the building blocks on which all further learning is predicated' (Barber, 1997, p.3). Furthermore, ICD does not seem to compensate for the perceived deficiencies of pre-service training. Questionnaire data from the Literacy Survey indicated that up to half of class teachers rated ICD on identifying and dealing with reading difficulties as of 'not much use', a view re-iterated in the interviews. Therefore, I suggest that pre-service courses need a stronger focus on the processes underlying reading, and on reading development. Further, ICD that emphasizes the processes underlying language and literacy, and is practical rather than theoretical, should be readily available to teachers in designated disadvantaged schools.

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